

“A FAINT, WRY, BITTER SMILE”: RICHARD WRIGHT AND MEDIA
REPRESENTATIONS OF AFRICAN AMERICANS

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ABSTRACT

“A FAINT, WRY, BITTER SMILE”: RICHARD WRIGHT AND MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF AFRICAN AMERICANS

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Richard Wright's major works of the early 1940s—*Native Son* (1940) and *12 Million Black Voices* (1941)—protest the racism of the mainstream media and advance positive images of African American life. Through his exploration of the media's power, he depicts the human toll caused in a historical moment when visual images were gaining currency and presents alternative representations that accurately depict black life. In this thesis, I identify and analyze the ways Wright challenges representations of African Americans across film, print media, and photography. In *Native Son*, Wright protests media representations of African Americans by highlighting the demonization of Bigger Thomas by the mainstream media. *12 Million Black Voices* complements *Native Son* through its effort to realistically portray African Americans. My first chapter explores Bigger Thomas's experience as an audience member of *Trader Horn*, through which Wright demonstrates that Hollywood representations of African Americans deceive black people into entering an inherently unfair racial and economic system only to punish them for attempting to cross racial and economic boundaries. In my second chapter, I argue that Bigger's journalistic treatment dehumanizes him and convinces white society of the necessity of his execution. In this way, Wright suggests that newspapers possess a kind of legal authority over black life. The final chapter of my thesis examines the significance of

photography in Wright's 1941 photobook *12 Million Black Voices*. In this work, Wright utilizes Farm Security Administration photographs—taken by white photographers—to replace negative mainstream representations of African Americans with positive and realistic representations of black life through the history of black people in the United States from the beginning of slavery up until his present day. In this way, Wright challenges white supremacy by recontextualizing African Americans within African American history.

INTRODUCTION: MEDIA AND RICHARD WRIGHT

Richard Wright's works of the early 1940s—specifically *Native Son* and *12 Million Black Voices*—emblemize a tradition of black resistance that developed parallel to the history of the oppression of African Americans. Because this oppression was often implemented through negative media representations of black people, the vexed relationship between African Americans and the mainstream media reverberates throughout black media, literature, and art. Jacob Lawrence's *Migration Series*, the African American newspaper *The Chicago Defender*, the fiction of Charles Chesnutt, the photography of Gordon Parks, and the films of Charles Burnett create positive representations of black life and demonstrate that this tradition of resistance extends across a variety of media. Negative media representations of African Americans extended the oppressive project of Jim Crow—which is enacted both through law and custom—by attempting to persuade the white American public of the danger and inferiority of African Americans. Caricatures of black Americans in newspapers, postcards of lynching victims, and Hollywood actors in blackface pervade U.S. history. The very etymology of “Jim Crow” reveals this history as Thomas Rice, a white actor, created and in blackface performed the Jim Crow character, which became a “craze” by the late 1830s (Scriven 93). Richard Wright is particularly aware of this tradition as he utilizes literature and photography to confront representations of African Americans in Hollywood, mainstream newspapers, and New Deal photographs. In his works of the early 1940s, Richard Wright advances images of black life that humanize African Americans by relating their histories and psyches, both personal and communal. In *Native Son* (1940), Wright protests media representations of African Americans by demonstrating that Hollywood cinema tricks Bigger into entering an inherently unfair racial and

economic system and mainstream newspapers demonize Bigger to justify his arrest and execution. *12 Million Black Voices* (1941) overturns the media's racism conveyed in *Native Son* in its endeavor to realistically portray African Americans. Wright's representations of African Americans contradict mainstream media representations of African Americans as buffoonish or criminal-minded by depicting the material squalor and psychological torment that accompany black life under Jim Crow. However, Wright does not suggest in *12 Million Black Voices* that this poor quality of life is necessary or predestined. Rather, he concludes his photobook with a proclamation that African Americans can and will transcend the confines placed upon them and demonstrate their humanity and equality through their contributions to culture, art, and industry.

In this thesis, I analyze Richard Wright's rejection of the mainstream media's cinematic, print, and photographic representations of African Americans in his fiction and photography. The first chapter explores Bigger Thomas's experience as an audience member of *Trader Horn*, a 1931 Hollywood film about two white merchants who retrieve a white missionary's daughter from a tribe in Africa, who are portrayed as savages. As the film plays, Bigger begins to daydream and replaces the images of naked Africans with images of wealthy white Americans, ultimately concluding that he can access social and economic freedom by taking the job as the Dalton family's chauffeur and observing the secrets of their success. In this way, Wright demonstrates that Hollywood representations of African Americans deceive black people into entering an inherently unfair racial and economic system. In the second chapter, I argue that when African Americans reject their role in this system, their media representations become increasingly distorted and hostile as the mainstream media seeks their physical death. Bigger—whose foray into white society ends with the accidental death of a young white woman from a wealthy family—experiences this fate. The novel contains only two direct references to

newspapers in the first section: one in the opening scene when Bigger uses pieces of newspaper to clean up after he kills a rat and the second when Bigger dismembers Mary Dalton on old newspapers. These unsettling scenes foreshadow Bigger's own execution, precipitated by his animalistic representation by the news media throughout the novel's second and third sections. After analyzing Wright's critique of media images of African Americans in *Native Son*, my final chapter addresses *12 Million Black Voices*. In this photobook, Wright utilizes Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographs selected by Edwin Rosskam and taken by Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans, among others, to tell the story of the Great Migration. Wright uses these photographs to rewrite American history from the viewpoint of African Americans. In so doing, he advances more positive and truthful images of black life. Through his alternative representations of black life, Wright posits that even while white oppressors seek to limit the economic and social advancement of African Americans, black people have nonetheless advanced spiritually and morally. Moreover, he claims that Jim Crow—the most powerful manifestation of white supremacist ideology—negatively impacts the United States as a whole by not allowing African Americans to contribute to the country's growth.

Although scholarship on Wright abounds, his interest in challenging and supplanting media representations of African Americans is surprisingly underrepresented. Becca Gercken claims that Wright's characterizations of African Americans accomplish “in prose what filmmakers accomplish in celluloid” and that *Native Son* prefigures “the power of the ‘gaze’ to shape behavior, attitudes, and even the sense of self” (633). Later, she concludes with the assertion, “Wright worked to create a new method of narration—the cinematic novel—to tell the story of two men emasculated by the dominant culture” (646). Such claims ignore Wright's interest in advancing new representations of African Americans that appear most vividly in *12*

Million Black Voices. Anthony Reed comments that *Trader Horn* displays the same white anxiety depicted in *Native Son* when he writes, “The threat of mob or mass violence such as that which initiates the dramatic chase of *Trader Horn* haunts *Native Son*” as is demonstrated by the “deployment of two regiments of the Illinois National Guard... to ‘keep public peace’ during Bigger’s trial” (606). As such, Reed demonstrates that by replicating the fears expressed in *Trader Horn* in *Native Son*, Wright suggests that media images are enforced on the lives of marginalized African Americans. Benjamin Balthaser offers similar commentary of the media’s power in Wright’s works, contextualizing *Native Son* and *12 Million Black Voices* as reactions to documentary’s “role in establishing the ‘truth’ about race” (358). He also establishes the cultural significance of photography and the Great Migration when he writes: “nearly all of the images produced by the FSA of African Americans were rural” and photographs taken of “the great migration and life of urban African Americans were entirely undocumented in large-press book form” until the publication of *12 Million Black Voices* (363-364). Robin Lucy identifies Wright’s attempt to write against black stereotypes in *12 Million Black Voices*, commenting that in the photobook, “the material conditions of black folklife are literally written on southern soil” (262). This acknowledgment recognizes Wright’s intention of crafting realistic representations of African American life, but Lucy uses it instead as a backdrop for a discussion of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. J. J. Butts casts *12 Million Black Voices* as a location of black resistance when he writes that it repurposes New Deal photographs to challenge “the authority of the FWP [Federal Writers’ Project] over black experience” (653). Similarly, Jeff Allred writes that *12 Million Black Voices* eschews the populist victim mentality common to leftist art during the New Deal to confront “received notions of geography, history, and identity” (550). He also asserts that in this text Wright’s chief goal of narrating slavery and Jim Crow and predicting “full citizenship and

equality” is muted by his irony (550). Allred’s claim that Wright fails to credibly predict a better future for African Americans overlooks the text’s central purpose of advancing realistic representations of African Americans. Wright’s use of New Deal photographs to challenge perceptions of African Americans as poor and helpless suggests that the text’s primary importance lies in replacing stereotypes of African American prevalent in the mainstream media with actual images of black people. The photobook’s climactic prophecy of a better tomorrow is in fact credible because of the real and physical impact on black life made by visual representations of African Americans.

My thesis employs a theoretical framework based on the works of Walter Benjamin, Louis Althusser, and W.E.B. Du Bois. In “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Louis Althusser explains that ideologies trick people into accepting their precepts through a process he interchangeably refers to as interpellation and hailing. Althusser argues that ideology indoctrinates people as subjects out of its very nature because the “existence of ideology and the hailing or interpellation of individuals as subjects are one and the same thing” (49).

In his landmark essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” Walter Benjamin argues that film holds the power to control the thoughts and actions of its viewers. He further explains this theory when he claims that people’s interactions with cinema convince them “that technology will release them from their enslavement to the powers of the apparatus only when humanity’s whole constitution has adapted itself to the new productive forces which the second technology has set free” (108). These theoretical insights into the media’s ideological functions expose and clarify the ease with which the media perpetuates Jim Crow segregation. I also explore the significance of Du Bois’s concept of double-consciousness—or the notion that black people understand the mentality of white people out of

necessity—to *12 Million Black Voices*. Du Bois explains that while white people have no need to understand African Americans, African Americans must understand white people in order to survive among them. I position *Native Son* and *12 Million Black Voices* within these observations to better understand the mainstream media's misrepresentation of African Americans and Richard Wright's challenge to this misrepresentation with his own representations of African Americans and their lives.

Bigger Thomas lives in fear—a desire to ignore his reality defines his very existence. Near the novel's beginning, the narrator remarks that Bigger “knew that the moment he allowed what his life meant to enter fully into his consciousness, he would either kill himself or someone else” (10). A basic survival instinct spurs this resistance to self-awareness as Bigger internalizes the geographic, relational, and economic confines on African Americans. However, Bigger's trip to the movies imbues him with self-confidence. While awaiting *Trader Horn*, Bigger and his friend Jack view a newsreel that features Mary Dalton, the daughter of Bigger's future boss, alongside many other rich white Americans. Bigger becomes hopeful about his proximity to such successful people and reasons that he can learn the methods of their success: “He would see just how they did it. Sure, it was all a game and white people knew how to play it” (33). Despite his optimism, Bigger seems to understand his exclusion from this “game” because after obsessing over images of the wealthy American elite, he ignores images of Africans in *Trader Horn*. A few minutes into the film, Bigger loses focus: “gradually the African scene changed and was replaced by images in his own mind of white men and women dressed in black and white clothes, laughing, talking, drinking and dancing” (33). When Bigger and Jack leave, Bigger “had seen practically nothing of the picture, but he did not care” (34). As Bigger's expectation of finding success in white society remains unrealized, Wright demonstrates that Hollywood

representations of African Americans deceive black people into entering an inherently unfair racial and economic system.

A modern audience might doubt Bigger and Jack's praise of *Trader Horn* because it seems implausible that two young black men would enjoy a movie that reinforces ideologies of white supremacy and colonialism. Moreover, the film's low production quality, cartoonish performances, and confusing sentimentalism secure its aesthetic, cinematic, and narrative failure. Even so, *Trader Horn* found success in its time. Upon its release, the film received an Academy Award nomination for Best Picture. According to Dana Benelli, audiences felt the "compellingly authentic (and the more exotic the better) reality" of the travelogue genre—to which *Trader Horn* belongs—compensated for artistic or narrative shortcomings (7). It seems the popularity of *Trader Horn* resulted from its frequent shots of elephants, crocodiles, hippopotami, and other African animals taken from helicopters and all terrain vehicles. Although the images of wildlife inspired awe in American audiences, the presupposition of realism surely had as much to do with its depictions of black Africans. In fact, the film cuts indiscriminately between the people and animals of Africa. This representation of Africans bears a striking resemblance to the representations of Bigger advanced by the news media throughout *Native Son*. Jack and Bigger might reasonably see little connection between their lives and the lives of Africans in *Trader Horn*, but the mainstream media suggests their sameness through the negligible differentiation between Africans and African Americans.

Wright foreshadows the news media's violence against Bigger in *Native Son*'s first scene when Bigger kills a rat and uses the newspaper to "gingerly" remove it and "cover the smear of blood on the floor" (7, 8). This introductory, seemingly innate connection between violence and the newspaper explains Bigger's lack of surprise at his journalistic treatment later in the novel.

Through increasingly negative representations of Bigger, the newspapers in Chicago—and, eventually, elsewhere in the country—convict Bigger of rape and murder in the court of public opinion. Newspaper headlines such as “Hunt Black in Girl’s Death” (241) and “Authorities Hint Sex Crime” (243) incite a manhunt through “cellars, old buildings and more than one thousand Negro homes” on Chicago’s South Side by a search party of “eight thousand armed men” (256). Even before the mob captures Bigger, the newspaper deprives him of his agency. Even in their earliest reports, the journalists proclaim Bigger’s guilt. In one article, a journalist reports on “the Negro’s rape and murder of the missing heiress” (243) and in another Bigger is described as a “Negro killer and rapist” (256). Such characterizations demand retribution against Bigger in the most public manner possible, thereby reinforcing the legitimacy of white supremacy. While Bigger saves “one bullet for himself” and determines that the mob “would not take him alive” (267), he abandons his plan as soon as the mob confronts him. In this way, the narrator suggests that even Bigger lacks the power to circumvent the justice prescribed by the news media.

Although *Native Son*’s themes of socioeconomic injustice and Jim Crow racism clearly reappear throughout Wright’s photobook *12 Million Black Voices*, which was published the following year in 1941, the latter text is much more than the nonfiction counterpart to the narrative of Bigger Thomas. *12 Million Black Voices* extends *Native Son*’s project of challenging mass media representations of African Americans. Wright confronts his audience in the first sentence of *12 Million Black Voices* when he writes: “you usually take us [African Americans] for granted and think you know us, but... we are not what we seem” (10). Moreover, Wright opens the text’s second chapter by rejecting the term “Negro” as “not really a name at all, but a psychological island” (30). By challenging popular white beliefs about and standard designations of African Americans, Wright begins to negotiate representations of African Americans. While

in *Native Son* Wright identifies the ramifications of the media's representation of African Americans, in *12 Million Black Voices* he supplants them both in word and image. Wright demonstrates that media representations of blacks stem from fear, ignorance, and hate, and he develops his own representations of African Americans through historical and cultural analysis, which are more responsible and truthful. These representations of African American life are partially based on photographs taken by New Deal photographers. While the FSA photographs represent African Americans as rustic and rural, Wright contradicts such descriptions by contextualizing these photographs within African American history. Ultimately, Wright represents black life as “the most magical and meaningful picture of human experience in the Western world” (146). In doing so, he clarifies that because even the most sympathetic and progressive sources—such as the Works Progress Administration—misrepresent African Americans, black artists must represent black life themselves.

CHAPTER ONE: BIGGER GOES TO THE MOVIES: THE CINEMA AND JIM CROW

DESPERATION IN *NATIVE SON*

In *Native Son*, Richard Wright demonstrates that Hollywood's cinematic misrepresentations of African Americans and European Americans reinforce Jim Crow segregation, the most potent manifestation of white supremacist ideology in the United States during Wright's life. This racist action against the black community appears specifically in Jack and Bigger's decision to see *Trader Horn*, a film adaptation of Alfred Aloysius "Trader" Horn's travelling memoirs, *Trader Horn: A Young Man's Astounding Adventures in 19th-Century Equatorial Africa*. Anthony Reed argues in "Another Map of the South Side" that *Trader Horn* constitutes "part of the *specific* context for *Native Son*" alongside historical events such as the Great Migration of African Americans to the northern United States, the Red Summer, Leopold and Loeb's arrest and conviction, and World Wars I and II (605; emphasis in original). Wright demonstrates that Bigger's life with his entire family in a kitchenette, past criminal accusations, inability to get along within the African American community, and plan to commit an armed robbery with his friends all result from the impact of Jim Crow segregation on African Americans. In *Richard Wright's Art of Tragedy*, Joyce Ann Joyce claims that "the all-encompassing, overwhelming power that whites have over Blacks in *Native Son*" simultaneously inspires fear in Bigger and leads him to confront "the established worldview that dictates... the nature of his relationship to his immediate environment and to that outside the Black community" (30). In this way, Joyce clarifies that the racial, social, and economic pressures on Bigger define his experiences and inspire his behaviors. When Jack and Bigger go to the movies while awaiting the robbery planned for that afternoon, they do not merely seek distraction from

temporary nervousness—they flee the anxiety that accompanies their very existence. *Trader Horn* and the newsreel that precedes it offer an escape and a comfort for these young men. However, the tragic irony of this audience experience lies in the exciting and elegant representations of European Americans in the newsreel and wholly negative and misleading representations of Africans in *Trader Horn*, but Bigger readily accepts such cinematic images as truth. In fact, in blending the images of whites in the newsreel and blacks in *Trader Horn*, Bigger comes to the conclusion that “it was all a game and white people knew how to play it” (Wright 33). The narrator remains vague about the definition of “it,” but presumably Bigger means life as a whole. On one hand, Bigger correctly reasons that white people know the rules of the game. On the other hand, the game’s most important rule—withheld by both the newsreel and *Trader Horn*—is the exclusion of non-whites. In *Native Son*, Wright contextualizes the media as a tool of Jim Crow laws. In his article, “Killing the Documentarian,” Balthaser explains that Wright recognized “that racial identity and racial consciousness are mediated through mass culture” and that “*Native Son* reminds us that this is hardly a neutral or even process” (365)—indeed, the media’s construction of blackness is entirely prejudiced by the ideology of Jim Crow. Hollywood and its reinforcement of Jim Crow entice Bigger with promises of economic freedom and trap him with the indiscriminately applied representation of the black rapist introduced in *Trader Horn*. In this way, cinematic representations of European Americans and Africans trick Bigger into willingly entering a system of social and economic injustice only to punish him for transgressing social, economic, and especially sexual boundaries.

The significance of *Native Son* derives in part from Bigger’s relevance to the African American community. If Wright intended Bigger to represent all young black men living in urban centers, then *Native Son*—the best known novel by the first internationally recognized

African American author (Gilroy 146)—at least constitutes a missed opportunity, if not a detriment to the black community. At first glance, Bigger personifies the crude, unhinged predator that white supremacists believed African Americans to be. Bigger even threatens the few people who actually care about him: he scares his younger sister (8), assaults his friend (38-39), and rapes and murders his girlfriend (233-236). If Bigger represents the black community in general, then his character pathologizes black men. James Baldwin levies this criticism against Richard Wright, arguing that Wright's novel is "trapped by the American image of Negro life" (40) and that Wright leads his audience, through Bigger's character and perceptions, "to believe that in Negro life there exists no tradition, no field of manners, no possibility of ritual or intercourse" (36). Kenneth Kinnamon, in *The Emergence of Richard Wright*, complicates such assertions when he suggests Bigger's general connection to the black community: "To the extent that he is representative of black people in America, this question of the meaning of his individual 'fate' relates to the polemic intent of the novel as a whole, which is concerned with the collective racial situation and destiny of American blacks" (129). While Kinnamon recognizes that Bigger does not represent every member of the black community, he does suggest that Wright uses Bigger to explore the fate of the black community. Although Kinnamon understood Wright's interest in politics and social justice, his argument on this point seems to overlook the fact that Bigger is not the only African American living in poverty represented in *Native Son* and there are even several other young black men who are demographically comparable to Bigger, such as GH, Jack, and Gus, none of whom bear more than a passing resemblance to Bigger. Beyond Wright's effort to make Bigger anomalous even within his own peer group, Bigger is also condemned by Bessie for his apparent amorality. When Bigger defends his role in Mary's death by saying "They white folks. They done killed plenty of us,"

Bessie flatly responds “That don’t make it right” (178). The narrator reveals that at this moment Bigger “began to doubt her” because “he had never heard this tone in her voice before.”

Although Bigger assumes a similarity of vision in Bessie, Bessie distances herself from Bigger’s plot to exploit the death of Mary, whom he killed by accident. Although Bigger succeeds in forcing Bessie’s compliance with his plan, their argument clarifies the contrast between Bessie and Bigger, which further emphasizes that Bigger does not represent the African American community.¹ Moreover, in his revealing essay “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” Wright recounts making “the discovery that Bigger Thomas was not black all the time; he was white, too, and there were literally millions of him, everywhere” (441). Although he recounts five separate African American “Bigger Thomases” that he knew personally throughout his life, Bigger’s character represents a character type that transcends culture, nationality, or race, and one created by a grossly inequitable economic system.

Bigger’s belief that he can transcend the constraints of Jim Crow hinge on the manipulation and distraction that accompany his experience as a member of the audience watching *Trader Horn*. While he and Jack wait to commit robbery, Bigger suddenly becomes gripped with a “growing and deepening feeling of hysteria” that he believes a movie will relieve (28-29). Once at the movie theater, Jack and Bigger tell jokes and masturbate (30-32).² Bigger seems to pay no attention to the screen until he recognizes the names Mary Dalton and Henry Dalton in the newsreel (32). In other words, Bigger becomes engaged with the screen only when he can connect it to reality, even if the report of the wealthy elite vacationing in Florida has almost no relevance to his life in Chicago. Regardless of the contrast, the newsreel effectively lures Bigger into its world, so much so that when *Trader Horn*—the reason Jack and Bigger are at the theater to begin with—appears on screen, Bigger does not even see it: “Bigger turned his

eyes to the screen, but he did not look” (Wright 33). A few moments later, he recognizes the “pictures of naked black men and women whirling in wild dances” but soon “the African scene changed and was replaced by images in his own mind of white men and women dressed in black and white clothes, laughing, talking, drinking and dancing” (33). The narrator’s wording here is of special significance because in claiming that the scene “was replaced” with other images, the narrator suggests Bigger’s passivity. In other words, Bigger is a victim, not an accomplice, of the mainstream media’s manipulation. As Bigger leaves the theater, the narrator reminds the reader that Bigger “had seen practically nothing of the picture, but he did not care” (34). Bigger’s apathy signifies his manipulation in that it reveals his lack of awareness of this manipulation. In this way, the manipulation and distraction that define Bigger’s audience experience follow him as he leaves the theater and have an immediate and grave impact on his life.

Trader Horn’s narrative suggests that Africa corrupts the few white people who dare to enter it, while avoiding any suggestion of lawlessness on the part of whites. The film tells the story of two white men, Trader Horn and his sidekick Peru, who infiltrate an African clan with the help of their African translator and guide, Rencharo, and return with a young white woman, Nina Trent, the clan’s priestess. Although Horn seems to consider Peru white, Peru’s racial identity shifts throughout the film. Duncan Renaldo—the actor who portrays Peru—was born in Romania, but Peru speaks in an ambiguous accent, probably meant to represent him as Hispanic or Latino (“Duncan”). Horn comments that Peru’s father, with whom he traveled as a young man, could not speak English, which suggests that Peru is a first generation English speaker. Moreover, Horn reveals that “Peru” is a nickname when he introduces him to Nina Trent’s mother: “I’d like you to meet my young friend. Peru, I call him.” Although Horn keeps Peru at a distance throughout the film’s first act, Horn’s view of Peru eventually shifts from

condescension to camaraderie. This shift occurs when an indigenous African clan captures Horn, Peru, and Rencharo, and Horn becomes fearful of the clan's power. Horn's fear of blackness forces him into racial fraternity with Peru. The same blackness that bonds Peru and Horn also marginalizes Nina. Because Nina disappeared from her missionary family, the characters presume that the clan kidnapped Nina and held her against her will, despite the fact that she exercises complete sovereignty over the clan. Horn and Peru unquestioningly accept the hypothesis that her few years among indigenous Africans explain Nina's current state as a babbling nymphomaniac who strikes fear even in the hearts of Africans. While the film hints at Nina's rehabilitation through Peru's commitment to marry her and pay for her education, a career in Africa renders Horn unfit for civilized society. Horn states his intentions to continue "trading rivers where no white man ever dared to come before" and "beholding the wonders of the jungle" because he "couldn't live away from them things." *Trader Horn* ends with Horn imagining Rencharo, killed by a spear during the group's escape, looking down on him from the clouds while Horn wanders back into Africa alone.³ In the case of both Nina and Horn, the film presupposes that Africa corrupts white people and ignores even the potential of wrongdoing by whites.

By representing blackness as a threat to whiteness, *Trader Horn* reiterates Jim Crow presuppositions of black inferiority and white superiority that determine Bigger's existence. As though to emphasize the disparity between black people and white people, *Trader Horn* relies on tropes of primitivization to represent Africans. While Rencharo is the most humanized and visible African character in the film, he speaks infrequently and holds no real importance to the plot. Rather, he serves as the straight man for Horn's steady barrage of jokes and insults, routinely degrading him with descriptions such as "half bulldog, half watchful mother" and

“black ape.” The epithet “black ape” is also used against Bigger by lynch mobs on several occasions (Wright 270, 334, and 337) and by the state attorney Buckley during his closing remarks in court (408). Although Horn’s allegedly humorous comments about Rencharo occasionally turn serious, the other characters do not seem to notice—Peru and Nina barely acknowledge his existence, much less his humanity. Other black characters receive even shoddier treatment. Throughout the film, mobs of Africans chant and dance while the few Africans who speak individually do so in a language unknown to the audience and one the filmmakers do not subtitle.⁴ Some of the earliest images of Africans in *Trader Horn* are of men climbing trees and bare-breasted women whose nudity does not attract the attention of the otherwise sexually astute Peru and Horn. The dismissal of black female sexuality reappears in *Native Son* through the treatment of Bessie’s rape and murder. While prosecutors use Bessie’s body as circumstantial evidence that he raped and murdered Mary, the judge describes Bigger’s crimes as “acts committed upon one Mary Dalton.” Although no one denies or ignores Bigger’s rape and murder of Bessie, the apparent unwillingness to charge Bigger for his crimes against Bessie echoes the refusal to acknowledge black humanity in *Trader Horn* while highlighting its ultimately grim reality. Rencharo’s fate presents some complication to this formula because of his heavenly residence, but this plot point does not stress Rencharo’s spiritual or moral worth so much as it emphasizes that old justification that black people must accept their subservient role in this life to receive their reward in the next life.

Trader Horn’s misrepresentation of Africa begins during the opening credits, by way of two title cards devoted to acknowledgements. In the first card, the studio—Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer—expresses its debt “to the government officials of” Tanganyika, Uganda, Kenya, Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, and the Belgian Congo. With the obvious exception of the Belgian Congo, each

of these countries was under British colonial rule during the production of *Trader Horn*. In this way, the producers ignore the colonial violence that dominated Africa's past and present. The next slide thanks "the White Hunters... for their courageous services through 14,000 miles of African veldt and jungle." These cards—as well as the other opening credits—appear against a map of Africa, featureless aside from a few mountains and sketches of exotic animals. Cedric J. Robinson claims in *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning* that this map reveals the film's racist fantasies when he argues such representations constitute a "deliberate denial of African histories" and that "the disappearance of civilizations, nations, cities, towns, villages was calculated" (329). Moreover, despite the fact the map pictures West Africa, "the topography, fauna, cultures, and peoples portrayed in the film were not West African." The producers probably assumed correctly that their audience would not realize such discrepancies, but these misrepresentations of Africa surpass mere inconsistencies. Robinson claims that the "map informed its audience that Africans had no past which the West was obliged to acknowledge" (329). However, because the producers made *Trader Horn* for an American audience, this information does not just disinherit Africans, but African Americans as well. Writing on the postcolonial implications of *Trader Horn*, Ben Owen argues that the film has "a representational problem" that "make[s] the onscreen exploitation of colonial labourers seem natural to a US audience" (481).⁵ It comes as no surprise that this problem also manifested in the film's production. Owen notes that the film's failure "to acknowledge the work done by black Africans on its production is no surprise given the prevailing colonialist and racist assumptions of white America" (481). In this way, Owen demonstrates that colonialism and Jim Crow function jointly in their representation of black people as subservient and inferior to white people.

Bigger and Jack's viewing experience of the newsreel and *Trader Horn* exemplifies the

interpellation process by which ideology transforms people into subjects, which replaces the individual's ability to think critically with a prepackaged set of beliefs and opinions. Louis Althusser argues in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" that interpellation or hailing—terms that Althusser uses interchangeably—succeeds because of its perceived normalcy. Because humans naturally tend toward subjectivity (44 note 15), interpellation appears as familiar as "the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: 'Hey, you there!'" (48). Moreover, he claims that ideology interpellates subjects out of its very nature: "The existence of ideology and the hailing or interpellation of individuals as subjects are one and the same thing" (49). Althusser hints at the filmic implications of interpellation when he writes, "the 'actors' in this *mise en scène* of interpellation, and their respective roles, are reflected in the very structure of all ideology" (51). Through this invocation of cinematic language, Althusser's reveals the autonomy that the apparatus holds over the subject. As David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson note, while *mise en scène* translates to "staging an action," in film theory it refers to "the director's control over what appears in the film frame" (169). More significantly, they also note that "of all the techniques of cinema, mise-en-scene is the one with which we [audience members] are most familiar" because while the audience may not notice the finer technological or artistic points of film, "many of our most sharply etched memories of the cinema... center on mise-en-scene" (169). Bordwell and Thompson imply that the effectiveness of *mise-en-scène* is based in a sense of familiarity. This sense of familiarity enables *mise-en-scène* to engage audiences in the same way that ideology hails subjects.

Walter Benjamin offers a more complete theory of film's role in interpellation in his essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility." Benjamin asserts that the "*function of film is to train human beings in the apperceptions and reactions needed to deal*

with a vast apparatus whose role in their lives is expanding almost daily” (108; emphasis in original). He further argues that interactions with this apparatus teach individuals “that technology will release them from their enslavement to the powers of the apparatus only when humanity’s whole constitution has adapted itself to the new productive forces which the second technology has set free” (108).⁶ For Benjamin, film’s power to enslave develops from the inherent inauthenticity of the reproducible artwork. He claims that once “the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applied to artistic production, the whole social function of art is revolutionized. Instead of being founded on ritual, it is based on a different practice: politics” (106). In considering the “two polarities within the artwork itself,” which are its “cult value and its exhibition value,” Benjamin maintains that the latter “tends to keep the artwork out of sight.” Although Benjamin offers religious icons to demonstrate this point, film exemplifies the invisibility of art in the twentieth century. Perhaps this example appears far-fetched. Because films are reproduced and screened all over the country, they are, in this way, more visible than any other art form. However, while Jack and Bigger obviously see *Trader Horn*, MGM obscures its artistic or fictional nature. Dana Benelli identifies the disparity between reality and the representation of reality when he writes that travelogue films such as *Trader Horn* “offered ... compellingly authentic (and the more exotic the better) reality to paying customers” (7). However, while film audiences in the 1930s demonstrated “enthusiasm for the opportunity to view moving images of never-before-seen cultures and landscapes” (Benelli 7), Robinson notes that a substantial portion of the filming for *Trader Horn* actually took place in Hollywood and Mexico (*Forgeries* 329). Just as Bigger accepts the authenticity of *Trader Horn*’s inauthentic images of Africa, so does he, to paraphrase Benjamin, submit to the training that teaches him how to react to the ideological apparatus that dominates his life.

Wright insists that Hollywood films service the project of Jim Crow segregation through the unavoidability of interpellation—the trick that convinces people to accept the mainstream ideology, no matter how oppressive. The clandestine and effective functionality of this trick clarifies Bigger and Jack’s improbable interest in and reaction to *Trader Horn*. On a purely cinematic level, the film is poorly acted, haphazardly edited, and illogically plotted. Beyond such artistic shortcomings, *Trader Horn* is also horrifically and relentlessly racist. The film represents Africans and various African animals interchangeably while Peru happily observes that Africans clans are “not savages, they’re just happy ignorant children”—only to be disproven by the sight of the remains of a man crucified upside down. The narrator suggests that Jack and Bigger have seen the movie before when Jack notes that it is “running again” (Wright 29), but that two young black men in Chicago would see this movie and enjoy it at all seems to break with the novel’s realism. On the contrary, the representations of black people in *Trader Horn* do not alarm Jack and Bigger because they match the representations that secure their second-class citizenship in the United States of Jim Crow segregation. Because the pair expects to see black people represented as savage, animalistic, or criminal, *Trader Horn* interpellates Jack and Bigger as naturally as—to recycle Althusser’s perfect analogy—a policeman waving them down on the street. As such, these filmic images of black people do not introduce the denial of their humanity, but merely reinforce the denial already constructed by white supremacists.

In *Native Son*, Wright draws parallels between Jim Crow and Hollywood film to suggest that African Americans are vulnerable to the manipulative effects of Hollywood. More specifically, Wright demonstrates that Hollywood film—epitomized by *Trader Horn*—and Jim Crow segregation function in tandem ideologically in that each represent black people as necessarily inferior to white people. Because *Trader Horn* separates black characters from white

characters by contextualizing Africans as either subservient or dangerous to Westerners, the film visually reinforces this allegedly inherent difference between black people and white people. Similarly, because Jim Crow laws legally separate the U.S. population along racial boundaries, they create a reality in which African Americans and European Americans are constructed as essentially different. Bigger identifies this connection between the cinema and segregation early in the novel. Upon leaving his kitchenette for the first time in the novel, Bigger sees a poster of Buckley, the State Attorney who seeks his death later in the novel. Bigger finds it difficult to hide from Buckley's stare: "it kept looking unblinkingly back at you until you got so far from it you had to take your eyes away, and then it stopped, like a movie blackout. Above the top of the poster were tall red letters: YOU CAN'T WIN!" (13). Bigger's interpretation of his escape from this white face as the conclusion of a movie suggests that political authority and filmic images hold similar power in his life. Wright reminds the reader of this harrowing connection later in the novel during Buckley's first physical appearance, when he proclaims his ability to "put [Bigger] in a dozen electric chairs" (291). Moments after Bigger sees Buckley on the billboard, while he and Gus "play 'white'" (17), Bigger commands Gus to "attack the enemy's left flank" (18). When Gus asks the meaning of "left flank," Bigger reveals that he does not know: "I heard it in the movies" (18). In this way, Wright demonstrates that Hollywood film directly informs Bigger's representations of white people and that such representations rely primarily on a power differential. For Bigger, white people do not just occupy privileged positions in the government, they also know words that he does not know. Through this conflation of filmic representations and racial segregation, Wright foreshadows Bigger's experience in the audience of *Trader Horn*. In establishing these similarities between Jim Crow and Hollywood, Wright signifies the unique ways in which African Americans experience the cinema.⁷

The newsreel and *Trader Horn* isolate Bigger by turning him against peers both in his economic class and his racial identity. Bigger's experience as an audience member begins with his fascination at scenes of upper class white life, which mislead him into believing that he should trust wealthy whites, reasoning that "rich white people were not so hard on Negroes; it was the poor whites who hated Negroes" (33). Since Bigger probably had more frequent contact with poor whites than rich whites, the racist actions of the wealthy might be less obvious to him, as Max attempts to make clear through his legal defense of Bigger. These images occupy Bigger's mind long after the newsreel ends and accompany Bigger's increasingly extreme view of the difference between poor and wealthy European Americans. During *Trader Horn* Bigger concludes, "[p]oor white people were stupid. It was the rich white people who were smart and knew how to treat people" (34). Because Bigger does not actually affiliate with poor whites, he needs only to convince himself of their inferiority. However, he must exert more effort to rid himself of his black friends. Still under the influence of the cinematic representations of white Americans and black Africans, Bigger decides that "[h]e was a fool for wanting to rob Blum's just when he was about to get a good job" (34). After the film, Bigger redirects his anger towards Jack, GH, and Gus. Although he is too ashamed to explain his reluctance to rob Blum's, Bigger starts a fight with his would be accomplices, ultimately focusing on Gus, whom he accuses of cowardice (36). While Bigger's friends see through his façade—at one point GH remarks, "You done spoiled things now... I reckon that was what you wanted" (40)—Bigger continues to threaten violence and make accusations until he is banished from the group. That is, he continues until he is no longer obligated to rob Blum. Bigger returns home "depressed" (41) but becomes "relieved and glad that in an hour he was going to see about that job at the Dalton place" (42). Although Bigger presupposes his economic advancement, his isolation renders him more

vulnerable than ever to the violent reaction against his decision to transgress divisions of class and race.

Bigger's deception by the newsreel and *Trader Horn* depends on the believability of the filmic representations of class and race. Indeed, although Bigger clearly misunderstands the conditions of his social position, some of his assumptions come to fruition. While his newly forged insight that white people simply know the rules of the game is vague, some of his specific assumptions about Mary prove true. For example, while thinking about Mary, Bigger wonders if "maybe she'd like to come to the South Side and see the sights sometimes. Or maybe she had a secret sweetheart and only he would know about it because he would have to driver her around" (34). Both of these presumptions come true. On his first night as the Dalton's chauffer, Jan demands Bigger take him and Mary to a "real" South Side restaurant, and the group ends up at Ernie's Chicken Shack (69). Jan and Mary's insistence on Bigger's company at their dinner shocks Bigger, and although he has no interest in joining them, he decides to because "after all, this was his job and it was just as painful to sit here and let them stare at him as it was to go in" (71). The success of Jan and Mary's demand is based in white privilege—Bigger is ultimately too scared and confused to refuse them—and devastates Bigger. He is embarrassed by Jack and Bessie and finally finds "that the very organic functions of his body had altered" (73). As soon as they leave Ernie's Chicken Shack, another of Bigger's predictions comes true as he drives Mary and Jan around Washington Park while they drink and have sex in the back seat. The experience is surreal for Bigger, and he feels as though "he was floating in the car" while "Jan and Mary were in back, kissing, spooning" (78). Although the fruition of this prediction does not have immediate consequences for Bigger, Mary's intoxicated state and late arrival home force Bigger to help her to bed. Subsequently, when Mrs. Dalton enters the room, Bigger covers Mary's face

with a pillow to silence her because he recognizes that his presence in her room would cause his own death. In this way, the secretive and socially unacceptable nature of her relationship with Jan contributes to the circumstances of her death at Bigger's hands. While Bigger correctly predicts Mary's interest in the South Side and her secret lover, the ramifications of these aspects of her life never occur to him and ultimately Bigger becomes a murderer and rapist in the eyes of the media and public.

In *Native Son*, Wright demonstrates Hollywood's perpetuation of white anxiety about interracial sex to control African Americans. Hollywood and Jim Crow begin their isolation of Bigger by enticing him with unobtainable images of economic success in *Trader Horn* and the newsreel, but they complete this project by representing him as a sexual predator. The narrative of *Trader Horn* hinges on the alleged threat that black men pose to white women as Nina Trent's fate demonstrates white fears of black rape. Although Horn and his co-writer Ethelreda Lewis exaggerated many aspects of his life story, only Nina—named Lola D. in the book—was a complete fabrication. Horn and Lewis originally conceived Lola as “the daughter of a white trader and octoroon, who had become a priestess among the savages” (Robinson 327). Despite the fantastical and ahistorical nature of this tall tale, Lola's multiracial background and apparently willing cohabitation with “savages” acknowledges an intercultural history that the film adaptation disregards. MGM's transformation of the Euro-African Lola into the fair and blonde Nina, kidnapped by a dangerous and bewitched tribe, reveals white American male fears of interracial sexual relations, whether forced or consensual.⁸ European American men treated such interactions between white women and black men as repugnant, but were generally unconcerned with similar relations between black women and white men.⁹ The fear of interracial sex between white women and black men first appears in *Trader Horn* at Horn and Peru's

chance encounter with Nina's mother Edith. As a widow who devotes her life to finding her long lost daughter at the cost of rest or remarriage, Edith exemplifies womanhood in that she is a dedicated mother yet presumed sexually inactive because of her refusal to remarry. When she leaves, literally carried off by four African men, with several more carrying her luggage, Horn praises her: "A brave man now, aye, that's something to warm the heart of a fellow, but a woman as brave as that widow woman there, aye, that's something past speaking about." In this way, Horn establishes the conditions of femininity, none of which Nina exhibits. Nina's adoption of the language and dress of the Africans convinces Horn and Peru of her corruption. Peru immediately objectifies her by commenting on her physical beauty while Horn orders Rencharo to "tell her we're white like herself." That Horn believes Nina lacks the mental capacity to understand their physical similarities signifies his conviction of her perversion. Moreover, after they manage to escape with Nina, her failed seduction of Peru confirms their unspoken fear of interracial sex. In fact, that Nina attempts to initiate sex with a man replaces the fear of rape with the even greater fear that Nina consensually engaged in sexual relations with African men, or perhaps suggested even the very existence of female sexuality.

The same white fear of the black sexual predator present in *Trader Horn* drives the plot of *Native Son*. The newsreel and *Trader Horn* together plant the image of interracial sex in Bigger's head, and the idea haunts him for the rest of the novel. During the newsreel, Jack remarks on the promiscuity of "rich white women," claiming that they "go to bed with anybody, from a poodle on up. They even have their chauffeurs" (33). Although Jack's comment intrigues Bigger, he does not draw his own conclusions about white life until *Trader Horn*, when he remembers "hearing somebody tell a story of a Negro chauffer who had married a rich white girl and the girl's family had shipped the couple out of the country and had supplied them with

money” (34). Even so, Bigger generally appears indifferent toward white women. He reflects that, aside from Mary Dalton, “all of the white women he had met” had “a certain coldness and reserve” (59). Later, during an interrogation he remembers that “whites thought that all Negroes yearned for white women” (197) and adjusts his performance accordingly by looking to the floor when asked about Jan and Mary’s sexual relations. Despite his self-conscious detachment toward white women, Bigger impulsively seizes upon his opportunity for sexual contact with Mary while she is intoxicated (85). Wright plays into the fear that white women desire black men in descriptions such as “he... felt the sharp bones of her hips move in a hard and veritable grind” (84) and “he tightened his fingers on her breasts, kissing her again, feeling her move toward him” (85). In this scene, Wright insinuates that Bigger takes advantage of Mary because he has been conditioned to do so by media images such as those in *Trader Horn*. However, the question of rape in *Native Son* becomes more complicated still when the narrator reports the stream of Bigger’s consciousness after Bessie informs him he will be charged with rape: “Had he raped her? Yes, he had raped her.... But rape was not what one did to women. Rape was what one felt when one’s back was against a wall and one had to strike out” (227). Although Bigger later admits to Max that he might have raped her had he not been interrupted (349), he nonetheless adamantly defends himself against accusations of rape at every opportunity. Bigger fears the accusation of rape so powerfully that he accidentally kills Mary and subsequently dismembers and burns her body in an attempt to avoid being labeled a rapist. Wright notes in his essay, “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” that in the Southern United States, “if a Negro rebels against rule and taboo, he is lynched and the reason for the lynching is usually called ‘rape’” (439). Anthony Reed suggests that Bigger’s father was lynched under exactly these circumstances when he writes that the “riot” (*Native Son* 74) Bigger says his father was killed in may have been “the

Elaine, Arkansas riots—or massacre—of September 20, 1919,” which stemmed from rumors that African Americans “were planning a major conspiracy to seize lands from white planters and rape their women” (Reed 608). The significance of rape in *Native Son* is complex, frustrating, and contradictory and Wright makes no effort to resolve any of the tension he creates. Regardless, it must be noted that despite—and maybe even because of—Bigger’s frantic and repeated attempts to avoid the label of rapist, he secures it.¹⁰

One might reasonably argue that the representations of Africans in *Trader Horn* have little relevance to Bigger’s life. After all, *Trader Horn* depicts African clans living agrarian lives in jungle settings. They sleep in huts with thatched roofs, trade and barter, and wear few clothes. Bigger lives in a dilapidated kitchenette with his entire immediate family, works little, and dresses warmly from head to toe to shield himself from the harshness of the Chicago winter. The only connection between Bigger and the Africans who populate *Trader Horn* seems to be that their distant ancestors came from the same continent, but Paul Gilroy points out that Richard Wright advances an “anti-essentialist conception of racial identity” in the “distinction he draws between ‘the social’ and ‘the racial’” (149). In other words, Gilroy clarifies that Wright believed race was not biologically determined, but rather socially constructed. The disparity between the lives of Africans and African Americans—far from discrediting their connection—offers insight into the way media images manipulate African Americans. Bigger and Jack experience *Trader Horn* as escapist fantasy, never realizing that—in the eyes of Hollywood—the images that represent Africans also represent African Americans. For this reason, Bigger accepts Hollywood’s vision of race relations despite expressing his anger at his position in society shortly before entering the theater. Moreover, to the extent that Bigger does pay attention to *Trader Horn*, he draws favorable conclusions about the black characters. In the brief moment

between his daydreams about white society and his departure from the theater with Jack, Bigger notices on the screen “black men and women dancing free and wild, men and women who were adjusted to their soil and at home in their world, secure from fear and hysteria” (34). Bigger does not identify with these images because feelings of freedom, belonging, and security are completely foreign to him. His realization that the lives of the Africans represented in the film bear no obvious resemblance to his own existence calls to mind the title of *Native Son*’s first section—“Fear.”

By the end of the novel—and the end of Bigger’s life—the narrator demonstrates the invasive effects of *Trader Horn*’s ideology by inverting its narrative onto the climax and conclusion of *Native Son*. Reed argues that in the killings of Mary and Bessie, *Native Son* “[reverses] the structure of *Trader Horn*, which ends with a projected union and continuation of a world” (610). While *Trader Horn* concludes with Horn continuing in his lifetime of adventure and discovery, the final moments of *Native Son* reveal that white supremacist ideology and Jim Crow segregation ultimately take Bigger’s will to live. In their last conversation, Max attempts to comfort Bigger and convince him to believe in himself. Although Max does not receive the reaction he wants, Bigger nonetheless claims to believe in himself and that he better understands himself as a result of killing Mary and his subsequent death sentence. At one point, Bigger’s attention drifts, just as it does when *Trader Horn* comes onto the screen:

“Men die alone, Bigger.”

But Bigger had not heard him. In him again, imperiously, was the desire to talk, to tell; his hands were lifted in mid-air and when he spoke he tried to charge into the tone of his words what he *himself* wanted to hear, what *he* needed.

“Mr. Max, I sort of saw myself after that night. And I sort of saw other people,

too.” Bigger’s voice died; he was listening to the echoes of his words in his own mind. He saw amazement and horror on Max’s face. (424-425)

Bigger’s remarkable word choice, that he “saw” himself and others, conflates his changing consciousness with his experience as an audience member. Max’s subsequent attempts to encourage Bigger to believe in himself and to die with dignity only confirm Bigger’s interpellation as a subject as Bigger claims his destiny has been fulfilled. Bigger remarks, “when a man kills, it’s for something.... I didn’t know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for ‘em” (429). Moments later, Max leaves Bigger to face execution alone. Despite Max’s prior claim that he is as hated as Bigger on the basis of his Jewish faith and union affiliation (Wright 348), Max demonstrates his inability to understand Bigger’s mindset, which in turn signifies the privilege of his own position. Wright surely recognizes the oppression suffered by Jews and union members, but he also demands that, as Bigger says, “they [white people] hate black folks more” than Jewish people (348). Besides, the hatred against other religious or ethnic groups is not central to *Native Son*. What is central to *Native Son* is the marginalization of all African Americans and the death of those who refuse to submit to the authority of Jim Crow. Bigger Thomas is one such African American, and when he transgresses the racial and economic boundaries imposed by Jim Crow segregation, Jim Crow utilizes cinematic representations created by Hollywood to delude him into committing crimes that will ensure his own death.

CHAPTER TWO: “NEGRO SEX-SLAYER”: HOW NEWSPAPERS WRITE BIGGER’S DEATH SENTENCE

The connection between violence and the news media in *Native Son* begins in the novel’s opening scene, when Bigger kills a rat with an iron skillet and cleans up the dead rat with a newspaper. This killing occurs immediately after Bigger wakes up, and Wright’s prose reflects his foggy headed state.¹¹ Although Bigger’s mother calls her children by name in these opening paragraphs, the narrator describes the family members by their most generic physical characteristics and does not even signify their relation, referring to Buddy as “another black boy” (3), Vera as “a brown-skinned girl” (4), and Mrs. Thomas as “the woman” (3). The narrator relates that, in the midst of the confusion and fear that accompanies the rat’s appearance, “the tiny, one-room apartment galvanized into violent action” (4). In this way, the narrator reveals that while the rat evokes a variety of reactions, each family member’s reaction comes together in an atmosphere of violence directed at the animal intruder. By the time Bigger kills the rat, the conditions of its death already exist. Moreover, by not offering the Thomas family members’ names, the narrator foreshadows the impersonal and dehumanizing nature of violence. After Bigger kills the rat, the narrator reveals, “Bigger took a shoe and pounded the rat’s head, crushing it, cursing hysterically: ‘You sonofabitch!’” (6). Bigger and Buddy go on to establish the threat that this rat posed to the family, and specifically to Bigger:

“Gee, but he’s a big bastard.”

“That sonofabitch could cut your throat.”

“He’s over a foot long.”

“How in hell do they get so big?”

“Eating garbage and anything else they can get.”

“Look, Bigger, there’s a three-inch rip in your pantleg.”

“Yeah; he was after me, all right.” (6-7)

While the rat did indeed bite Bigger’s pant leg, and rats constitute a major health concern in impoverished areas, it is nonetheless farfetched that the animal actually could have cut anyone’s throat, despite its “long yellow fangs” (6). After killing the rat and establishing the threat posed to the Thomas family, Bigger and Buddy use newspapers to transport the rat to the trashcan and clean up its blood (7-8). Richard Wright uses the elements of this brief scene—the characters’ namelessness, the violence against the perceived intruder, the discursive proclamation of the danger posed by the rat, and the disposal of the rat with newspapers—to introduce the connection between violence and the media that dominates the plot and message of *Native Son*.

Violence accompanies nearly every appearance of the printed word in this novel. The Thomas family’s reaction to and treatment of the rat foreshadows the violent actions of the news media throughout *Native Son*. Identifying several appearances of rats in *Native Son*, Kenneth Kinnamon claims their presence “forecast[s] Bigger’s fate” and that “the final ‘rat,’ of course, is Bigger himself, who likewise fights his pursuers when further flight is hopeless” (127). However, while the mob certainly sees Bigger as an animal to be killed, his dehumanization does not stop once he has been captured. I would like to extend Kinnamon’s argument to suggest that the comparison of Bigger to the novel’s first rat points most significantly to his treatment by the news media and that Wright’s comparison of the killing of the rat to the negative representation of Bigger clarifies exactly how the mainstream media views individuals who resist social conformity. Moreover, the pamphlets that Jan gives Bigger—*Race Prejudice on Trial*, *The Negro Question in the United States*, and *Black and White Unite and Fight*—are later used by

Britten, the private investigator hired by the Dalton family, to criminalize Jan. In this way, Wright suggests that even publications in the independent press are repurposed by mainstream white society. Before the news media turns on Bigger, Jan experiences journalistic abuse when the police arrest him in connection with Mary Dalton's disappearance—an event that Bigger capitalizes upon to distract attention from his own guilt. However, despite “Bigger’s nearly successful attempt to master the media codes that entrap him” (Balthaser 374), his reliance on this fear of criminality backfires and further disadvantages him at his own trial when his association with Jan further underscores his guilt. Bigger’s effort to redirect the newspapers’ focus have no ultimate impact on the news media’s efforts to dehumanize him by representing him as animalistic and eventually these misrepresentations necessitate Bigger’s visible and legal execution.

Wright’s theme of journalistic violence takes on a graver tone when Bigger uses newspapers to dispose of Mary’s body after he accidentally kills her. Throughout this scene, the narrator couples references to the newspaper with Mary or her remains. During his panic Bigger realizes that destroying the evidence of Mary’s death will create a mess. In the midst of this thought, Bigger notices “a pile of old newspapers stacked carefully in a corner” and places “a thick wad of them... under the head” (91-92). As Bigger saws through Mary’s flesh and bones with his pocketknife, blood creeps “outward in widening circles of pink on the newspapers, spreading quickly now” (92). After he completes the decapitation, Mary’s head hangs “limply on the newspapers,” and to move Mary’s body into the furnace, Bigger “wrapped the head in the newspapers and used the wad to push the bloody trunk of the body deeper into the furnace.” Finally, to destroy the last of the evidence, Bigger uses a scrap of newspaper to clean his pocketknife. These thoughts continue to haunt Bigger the following morning when he wakes up

to “an image of Mary’s head lying on the wet newspapers,” (99-100). The importance of this connection between Mary’s dead body and newspapers may seem exaggerated—after all, the narrative demands an explanation for the initial failure of the detectives and journalists to suspect Bigger of kidnapping or murder. While it stands to reason that the narrator merely chronicles Bigger’s dismemberment and attempted incineration of Mary as a matter of course, these moments demonstrate a closer focus on Mary’s body than previously in the scene. During the moments when Bigger carries Mary’s corpse downstairs, although the narrator makes occasional references to body parts, most of the narration focuses on Bigger, his fears, and his difficulty in transporting Mary to the basement. Once Bigger and Mary are in the basement—and especially when Bigger finds the newspapers—the narrator highlights Mary’s head, blood, and bones. While Mary’s death emphasizes the thematic connection between violence and the news media that the rat’s death establishes, her death also necessitates Bigger’s dehumanization and death at the hands of the media.

Even before journalists accuse Bigger of the rape and murder of Mary, Wright demonstrates that through the marginalization of Communist Party members, the news media’s authority approaches the same legal power possessed by the criminal justice system. During the newsreel that precedes *Trader Horn*, the announcer reveals that Mary’s parents “*summoned Mary home by wire from her winter vacation and denounced her Communist friend*” (32; emphasis in original). Bigger wonders out loud about the meaning of the word “Communist” and Jack responds, “Damn if I know. It’s a race of people who live in Russian, ain’t it?” (33). By reporting Jack’s reference to Communists as a “race”—rather than a political party, for example—the narrator emphasizes the white supremacist project of turning marginalized groups against each other. Although the obviousness of Bigger’s response—“That guy who was kissing

old man Dalton's daughter was a Communist and her folks didn't like it" (33)—breaks the scene's tension, the narrator depicts Bigger processing new information. This view into Bigger's mind partially explains the logic behind the measures he takes to cover up Mary's death later in the novel. Bigger begins to plot as soon as he realizes that Mary is dead. In this scene the narrator shifts to a stream of consciousness style narration: "Make them think that Jan did it. Reds'd do anything. Didn't the papers say so?" (88). Bigger reiterates this belief when he reasons that no one will miss Mary at first because of the essentially unpredictable nature of Communists: "People would think that she was up to some of her crazy ways when they missed her. Yes, Reds'd do anything. Didn't the papers say so?" (89). By repeating this exact phrase only sentences apart, Wright demonstrates Bigger's internalization of the news media's practice of reproducing negative representations of marginalized groups. Moreover, this insight into Bigger's thought process reveals that Bigger's understanding of Communists comes from their journalistic representation. Wright reemphasizes the media's successful manipulation by demonstrating that Bigger's acceptance of such representations is so ingrained that his decision to blame "Reds" and their "crazy ways" occurs instinctually. Bigger is not alone in these assertions—he quickly sets his plan into motion and successfully turns the news media, police, and Dalton family against Jan.

Through Bigger's attempt to frame Jan for Mary's kidnapping, Wright demonstrates that the news media targets the alternative press as part of a larger project to discredit groups that do not conform to the dominant ideology.¹² When he studies the pamphlets, Bigger intuitively realizes the threat posed by the Communist literature Jan distributes, even if he does not fully understand the reasoning behind anti-Communist sentiment. After reading the pamphlets' titles—*Race Prejudice on Trial*, *The Negro Question in the United States*, and *Black and White*

Unite and Fight—Bigger concludes they “do not seem so dangerous” (98). However, when Bigger notices a line in one pamphlet’s publication information that reads “*Issued by the Communist Party of the United States,*” he concludes, “*that* did seem dangerous” (98; emphasis in original). The picture becomes clearer at “a pen-and-ink drawing of a white hand clasping a black hand in solidarity,” an image that calls to mind “the moment when Jan had... shaken hands with him.... an awful moment of hate and shame” (98). Upon remembering that moment, Bigger commits to telling the police “that he was afraid of Reds,” and after he does so, he easily convinces the police, the media, the Dalton family, and even Bessie of Jan’s responsibility for Mary’s disappearance. In this way, Wright juxtaposes Bigger’s intuitive skepticism of Jan with the ready acceptance of every other character to believe the worst about “Reds” and suggests that Bigger’s manipulation indicates widespread presuppositions about the criminality of Communists. Although the police praise Bigger for his cooperation in exposing Communist transgressions, the lawyers condemn him by discrediting his only sympathetic witnesses, Jan.

Bigger’s failed attempt to exploit Jan’s party membership to escape suspicion and Buckley’s successful attempt to exploit Bigger’s affiliation with Jan to establish Bigger’s guilt signifies the troubled relationship between African Americans and the Communist Party. Communism found strong support among important figures in African American culture throughout the first half of the twentieth century. In his book *Black Marxism*, Cedric J. Robinson reveals that the Great Migration, responses to “the ‘Negro Question’” by Lenin and Stalin, and the advent of Black Nationalism were among the “events that directly influenced the special character of the American Communist movement and the party’s policies toward Blacks” (208). Robinson also cites W.E.B. Du Bois as “one of the first American theorists to sympathetically confront Marxist thought” (207). In a recent article, Joy Gleason Carew notes the “dramatic

impact upon opinion-making” made by visits to Russia by “Claude McKay, and later Langston Hughes and Paul Robeson” (2). However, at roughly the same time that McKay first traveled to Russia, Marcus Garvey denounced Communism as an invention of “white men who were in sympathy with the economic struggles of their own white masses” (296). Moreover, Garvey warned his followers about the alleged deceitfulness of the Communist Party by insisting, “the Negro must realize that he is being played for a ‘sucker’” (299). In *New Negro, Old Left*, William J. Maxwell reports that while a majority of Harlem Renaissance figures were either members or sympathizers of the Communist Party, some of the African Americans who initially praised the union of Communism and black literature “metamorphosed into vocal advocates of divorce” of the African American community from Communist ideology (1, 3). He goes on to contextualize Richard Wright as central to this ideological shift, tracing his literary dissent to *Native Son*, which Maxwell describes as a cautionary tale of the interactions between African Americans and the Communist Party (3-4). Wright’s memoir *Black Boy* confirms Maxwell’s claim in that it reveals Wright’s disaffection with the Communist Party predated his work on *Native Son*. In *Black Boy*, published in 1945, Wright comments on his experience withdrawing his Party membership: “The Communist Party felt that it had to assassinate me morally merely because I did not want to be bound by its decisions” (363). He goes on to relate his experience of “a public, physical assault by two white Communists with black Communists looking on” at a May Day demonstration in 1936, four years prior to *Native Son*’s release (381). Although Wright would eventually commit himself to anti-Communism, *Native Son* finds him coming to terms with his disillusionment.¹³ In “Killing the Documentarian,” Benjamin Balthaser argues that it is “Bigger’s status as an outsider brought within the orbit of modern institutions that makes him, in Wright’s eyes, a protorevolutionary figure” who established his identity as a “black proletariat”

outside of the standards and expectations of middle-class or white society (374). Even so, through the ultimate inability of Max—and, by proxy, the Communist Party—to understand or help Bigger, Wright suggests that Communism has little to offer the black community because its most disadvantaged members are so alienated and disillusioned that they find little use in accepting the ideological point of view that Communism demands of its members.

Although journalists, police, and the Dalton family readily believe in Jan's guilt, they also abandon this conviction almost as soon as the newspapers proclaim Bigger's guilt. At roughly the same time that the manhunt for Bigger begins, Jan's imprisonment comes to an abrupt end. One might argue that Jan's release is not so simple. After all, his arrest is preemptive—the police know nothing more than that Mary disappeared the night before and want to be certain Jan does not also disappear. Moreover, when the police receive Bigger's ransom note, Mr. Dalton calls for Jan's release, and Jan refuses to leave jail. It seems that the case against Bigger justifies Jan's release, especially in light of the discovery of Mary's bones in the furnace as well as Bigger's immediate flight, which partially incites the manhunt. However, Jan's previous attempts to offer an alibi met skepticism and dismissal. In a conversation between an unnamed journalist and Mr. Britten Britten affirms his conviction of Jan's guilt: "These Reds'll do anything and they stick together. Sure; he's got an alibi. Why shouldn't he have one? He's got enough pals working for 'im" (Wright 212). In addition to demonstrating that Jan's eventual exoneration is based on Bigger's guilt, Britten's assertion that communists will "do anything" affirms the reasoning on which Bigger's entire plot hinges. Britten goes on to decry Jan's decision to remain in jail by calling it "a dodge" and claiming that Jan "thinks that his gag'll work and leave him free of suspicion, but it won't" (212). Aside from Mr. Dalton, no character expresses even the possibility of Jan's innocence and it is only when Bigger becomes,

as Jonathan Elmer puts it, “the victim of a media blitz” (788) that the suspicion of Jan decreases. The same edition of the newspaper that exposes Bigger as a suspect in the headline, “Hunt Black in Girl’s Death” (241), also reports, “Communist leader proves alibi,” which signifies the newspaper’s role in determining guilt as Jan’s release from jail does not reflect his credibility, but indicates the discovery of a more believable suspect (243). While Bigger draws suspicion on himself by fleeing the scene of the crime, his immediate and racialized vilification in the news media indicates his believability has more to do with presuppositions about African American men than with the physical evidence of the crime.

Bigger’s representation as a murderer and rapist is easy for the public to believe because the myth of the black rapist is integral to white supremacy, the ideology into which police, journalists, and even Bigger are interpellated, which means that they are tricked into uncritically accepting its tenets. In his postscript to *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, Louis Althusser explains the method in which an ideological apparatus establishes its dominance and finds general acceptance. He begins this explanation by dismissing the notion that there exist any innate class divisions outside those advanced “in the ideology of the ruling class” (Althusser 57). He goes on to claim that class relations are reproduced “through a class struggle which counterposes the ruling class and the exploited class” (58). Regarding Bigger’s journalistic treatment in *Native Son*, his reproduction—to use Althusser’s term—in the media is in fact the reproduction of the subjugation of African Americans. When Althusser writes that to “adopt the point of view of reproduction is... to adopt the point of view of the class struggle” (58), he seems to suggest that such a point of view is subversive in itself. However, the narrator of *Native Son* depicts class struggle as a tool of the ruling class to further marginalize the exploited class when it relates to the media’s marginalization of both Jan and Bigger. Althusser continues his analysis

of the inception of ideologies, writing that ideologies are “born... from the social classes at grips in the class struggle: from their conditions of existence, their practices, their experiences of the struggle, etc.” (60). In other words, the marginalization of the exploited class dictates an ideology that justifies their exploitation. Althusser further argues that the “ideology of the ruling class” takes that position “by the installation of the ISAs [ideological state apparatuses]” (59). In the context of *Native Son*, the ideology of the ruling class is the white supremacist ideology advanced and enforced by Jim Crow segregation; the power and influence of the news media in the novel suggests that journalists constitute a primary mechanism of the advancement of this ideology. As Vincent Pérez claims in his article “Movies, Marxism, and Jim Crow,” Wright combats the stereotypes of “Black men as brutes, predators, or rapists... popularized in media culture” and demonstrates that the “media culture reflects and reproduces White society’s racist formulas” (144-45). In this way, Pérez suggests a symbiotic relationship between the media and Jim Crow—while Jim Crow determines the ideological point of view of the media, the media reproduces racist images of black people that protect Jim Crow’s authority. Indeed, Bigger’s immediate criminalization by the news media constitutes the reproduction of the class divisions that protect the ideology of the ruling class.

The reproduction of class divisions both demonstrates and perpetuates the interpellation of subjects by the ideological state apparatus of Jim Crow. Bigger, who visits Bessie after fleeing the Dalton house upon the discovery of Mary’s remains, seems oblivious to the relevance of the black rapist myth until Bessie mentions it: “They’ll.... They’ll say you raped her” (Wright 227). Her prediction immediately comes to fruition—the next newspaper that Bigger reads accuses him of rape. The news media’s assumptions progress rapidly as the same article that reports that the police “expressed belief that Miss Dalton met her death at the hands of the Negro, perhaps in

a sex crime” just paragraphs later mentions the angry public reaction to news of “the Negro’s rape and murder of the missing heiress” (243). This immediate escalation signifies the ease with which interpellated subjects believe reiterations of the dominant ideology. Wright demonstrates that this interpellation affects black and white people alike. White Chicagoans reveal their readiness to believe the myth of the black rapist by volunteering in the thousands to assist police in the raid of the South Side. At this point, Wright offers no insight into the mind of any individual white person, probably because he presumes his audience accepts their susceptibility to such beliefs. However, through a conversation between the characters Jack and Jim, he explores why African Americans might side with white oppressors.¹⁴ When Jack states his readiness to turn Bigger over to the police, Jim challenges him:

“But, Jack, s’pose he ain’ guilty?”

“Whut in hell he run offer fer then?”

“Mabbe he thought they wuz gonna blame the murder on *him*!”

“Lissen, Jim. Ef he wuzn’t guilty, then he oughta stayed ’n’ faced it. Ef Ah knowed where tha’ nigger wuz Ah’d turn ‘im up ’n’ git these white folks off me.”

“But, Jack, *ever*’ nigger looks guilty t’ white folks when somebody’s done a crime.”

“Yeah; tha’s ’cause so many of us ack like Bigger Thomas; tha’s all. When yuh ack like Bigger Thomas yuh stir up trouble.” (Wright 250-251)

Jack goes on to defend his position by claiming “Ah gotta family” (251), and Jim ends the conversation by pronouncing that he would rather die than give up Bigger to the police. Bigger takes the threat of being turned over to the police by another African American as a matter of course, which is how he takes nearly everything that happens to him. Rather than becoming

angry or despondent, Bigger merely commits to firing on “his own people” if they “bothered him” (252). Bigger’s lack of surprise signifies his familiarity with the ideologically invasive effects of Jim Crow.

Although newspapers repeatedly call for Bigger’s capture and execution, Bigger’s awareness of the closeness of death haunts him and drives his behavior from the beginning of the narrative. In the novel’s opening scene when his mother proclaims the nearness of her death, Bigger reacts by forcing himself to ignore his family: “He shut their voices out of his mind. He hated his family because he knew that they were suffering and that he was powerless to help them” (10). The anger he feels in this moment towards his family threatens to give way to rumination on his own existence. Bigger willfully dismisses such thoughts from his mind because he “knew that the moment he allowed what his life meant to enter fully into his consciousness, he would either kill himself or someone else” (10). By offering this insight into Bigger’s state of mind, Wright demonstrates that Bigger closely associates death and violence. This connection reveals certain truths about Bigger’s reality as a native of Mississippi and a resident of Southside Chicago. However, despite the apparently important role that death and violence play in Bigger’s life, the narrative reveals only one act of violence that affects Bigger directly prior to Mary’s death—the murder of his father. When Bigger eats with Jan and Mary at Ernie’s Kitchen Shack, Jan interrogates Bigger about his life:

“Where’s your father?”

“Dead.”

“How long ago was that?”

“He got killed in a riot when I was a kid—in the south.”

There was silence. The rum was helping Bigger.

“And what was done about it?” Jan asked.

“Nothing, far as I know.”

“How do you feel about it?”

“I don’t know.” (74-75)

Bigger’s seeming ambivalence to the murder of his own father either suggests that he takes such events, no matter how tragic or unjust, as a matter of course or reflects his misgivings about discussing lynching with white people. This expectation is so strong that both the narrator and Bigger repeatedly contextualize Bigger’s crimes and execution as the fulfillment of his destiny. Indeed, the third book of *Native Son*—the section that details his trial and conviction—is titled “Fate.” For Bigger, premature and unjust death is the model of black masculinity.

Because the news media signifies the authority of the ruling class, Bigger allows himself to be captured by the angry mob despite his aggressive self-defense and plan to commit suicide. When the mob made up of police and vigilante citizens finally corners Bigger on the rooftop of a Southside house, he fights as though he were a trained soldier. By firing shots at moving targets and throwing back tear gas canisters, he manages to fend off the “eight thousand armed men” (256) attempting to apprehend him. This effort is short lived and just before his capture his desire to kill turns inward: “He wanted to shoot, but remembered that he had but three bullets left. He would shoot when they were closer and he would save one bullet for himself. They would not take him alive” (267). Despite this resolve, when he has no further hope of escape, he tells himself to “take the gun and shoot it at them, shoot it empty” but finds that he cannot operate his pistol because “his fingers were too stiff” (269). Bigger subsequently shuts down, becoming “outside of it all,” and remains passive throughout his apprehension. One might argue that Bigger’s capture does not result from an unwillingness to take his own life, but rather a physical

inability. Although Bigger's frozen hands prevent him from using his weapon, his apparent goal is to fire his remaining bullets at his captors, not to turn the gun on himself. Bigger's submission to the authority of the mob not only belies his desire to avoid capture at any cost, but also squanders the entirety of his precise and clever plotting that follows Mary's death. This unexpected capitulation signifies his interpellation by the dominant ideology as advanced by mainstream newspapers. None of the articles Bigger reads before his arrest explicitly call for his execution, but reports of the widespread violence against African Americans during the search for Bigger describe these aggressions as natural and just. As such, journalists imply that Bigger should receive more severe treatment. In other words, if white people are justified in assaulting, firing, and invading the homes of African Americans unconnected to any crime (244), then surely this "Negro rapist and murderer" (245) deserves death. Bigger allows himself to be captured because as a subject to the ideology of the ruling class he cannot dispute the journalistic judgment on him, even if it is only implicitly suggested. Before his trial the narrator reveals Bigger's thought: "he had to die" (347). While awaiting his execution, Bigger verbalizes this thought when he mourns, "I got to die...." (428). The interpellation of Bigger necessitates his compliance with the judgment of the ideological state apparatus, even if it means his own death.

After Bigger's arrest, the news media shifts its intention from criminalization to dehumanization. Such representations appear in the novel's third book, "Fate," after Bigger's inquest. The first article Bigger reads modifies criminal nouns with racial adjectives: "Negro sex-slayer," "black killer," "black slayer," and "Negro killer" (279). By grammatically connecting his race to his alleged crimes, these characterizations essentialize Bigger's blackness as criminal. This criminalization advances into dehumanization as the journalist describes the reaction of "a terrified young white girl" who screams that Bigger "looks exactly like an ape" (279). The

narrator does not report any such character during the scene of the inquest, which takes place in a morgue and includes police, the Daltons, and Jan. Since the narrator does not include this girl in his description, and it is implausible that a child would attend this kind of procedure, she seems to be a fictionalized character meant to dramatize the fear that Bigger strikes in the most vulnerable members of the white community. The journalist reiterates this fear in his comment, “It is easy to imagine how this man, in the grip of a brain-numbing sex passion, overpowered little Mary Dalton” (279). By describing Mary as “little,” the author of this article establishes a connection between Mary and the girl at the inquest, as though this “terrified young white girl” is Mary’s ghost. The article’s author reiterates the threat Bigger poses in his animalistic description of Bigger. He writes that Bigger’s “lower jaw protrudes obnoxiously, reminding one of a jungle beast” and that “all in all” Bigger “seems a beast utterly untouched by the softening influences of modern civilization” (280). The descriptions of Bigger’s terrorization of white women and his animalistic nature segue into a report from the *Jackson Daily Star* on Bigger’s childhood in Jackson, Mississippi. The newspaper’s editor Edward Robertson comments, “Our experience here in Dixie with such depraved types of Negroes has shown that only the death penalty, inflicted in a public and dramatic manner, has any influence upon their peculiar mentality” (280). Although Robertson implies that the police should allow Bigger’s lynching, his death is nonetheless public and dramatic. Bigger’s trial allows news outlets nationwide to cover the case and facilitates the sociopolitical debate between Max and Buckley. In other words, Bigger’s trial is far more public and dramatic than a vigilante lynching ever could be.

Just as newspapers assert Bigger’s guilt to ensure his arrest, so do they dehumanize him to ensure his execution. Between his confession and his arraignment, Bigger asks the guard on his cellblock for a newspaper. In an unusual display of friendliness, which Bigger marvels at, the

guard gives Bigger his own newspaper. Bigger skims an article about his trial: “[the] slayer will undoubtedly pay supreme penalty for his crimes... there is no doubt of his guilt... what is doubtful is how many other crimes he has committed” (341-42). In this vague implication that Bigger has committed a seemingly unknowable number of crimes, the newspapers echo Buckley’s invocation of unsolved rapes and murders to threaten Bigger (305-306). Both acts of charging Bigger with superficially related crimes serve the same purpose of guaranteeing that Bigger does not escape the sentence of death deemed just by Jim Crow ideology. In revealing that the sentiments of the state attorney reappear in a newspaper article, the narrator emphasizes the unity of those working under this ideological imperative. What complicates the newspaper’s assertion of Bigger’s death sentence is the confession that Bigger signed. Because Bigger confessed to the murders of Mary and Bessie, one might argue that the newspaper is not presuming Bigger’s guilt but merely reporting it. This conclusion, though defensible, would overlook certain idiosyncrasies in the article. For example, the same headline that reports “Negro Killer Signs Confession For Two Murders” also proclaims “Not Guilty Plea Likely” (341). Moreover, while the newspaper rightly reports that Bigger confesses to two killings, they term him “the Negro rapist and killer” (342) despite the fact there is no indication that Bigger’s signed confession includes the admission of rape. It seems then that the newspaper cares little about Bigger’s confession. Although journalists accept his word that he killed Mary and Bessie, they reject his denial that he raped Mary. In other words, Bigger’s confession has no actual impact on the representation of Bigger in this newspaper article.

While the news media’s dehumanization of Bigger may not surprise readers, Bigger’s intense fascination with reading these accounts of his alleged crimes seems to conflict with his general desire to escape reality. From his first opportunity, Bigger scrambles to read as much as

he can about Mary's death. During his inquisition by Britten, the narrator notes that "Bigger darted a glance at the paper from where he was" (198). Later in the same scene when the white men leave him alone in the basement, Bigger takes this opportunity to read the newspaper. However, because he is afraid to be caught reading the paper, he searches the house first: "He stepped to the back door and made sure that it was locked; then he went to the top of the stairs and looked hurriedly into the kitchen; he saw no one. He bounded down the steps and snatched up the paper" (207). Bigger even risks capture while stealing a newspaper—once after he murders Bessie (241) and once while hiding in the attic of an apartment (255). The narrator offers some insight into Bigger's preoccupation with his representation in the newspaper by revealing that Bigger does not find the coverage surprising because "he had felt that things had been happening to him that should have gone into [the newspapers]. Only after he had acted upon feelings which he had had for years would the papers carry the story, *his* story" (222). Bigger seems to feel as though his crime and reports of it in the news media signify the fulfillment of his destiny. Before his arrest, while Bigger plots the framing of Jan and tries to keep up the appearance of normalcy, the newspaper accounts of his crime constitute his only pleasure. His arrest clarifies his interest in that while incarcerated Bigger mainly interacts with people when he feels pressured to and seems primarily interested in reading the newspaper. When Bigger regains consciousness in his jail cell after he faints at the inquest, his first words are, "I want a paper...I want to read the paper" (279). In fact, one newspaper article reveals that Bigger "spends most of his time reading newspaper accounts of his crime..." (365). Bigger reads this article moments before Max arrives to take him to trial, and it is the last one that Bigger reads. After he finishes the article he wonders: "It was the same thing over and over again. What was the use of reading it?" (366). This resignation suggests that while Bigger initially believes

that by paying close attention to his fate he can maintain some measure of control over it, he eventually accepts that the newspapers have more control of his fate than he does.

Despite Bigger's desperate yearning to have some control over his own fate, his powerlessness drives the action and defines the message of *Native Son*. This argument resounds throughout the novel and is one of the only aspects of Bigger's reality that he can articulate: "We black and they white. They got things and we ain't. They do things and we can't" (20). Although Wright reveals in "How 'Bigger' Was Born" that Bigger does not represent African American men in general—a point I discuss in greater detail in my previous chapter—these comments reveal broad truths about systemic racial oppression. Indeed, Max grounds his entire courtroom defense of Bigger in the assertion that this oppression is largely to blame for Bigger's crimes, at one point sardonically asking Mr. Dalton if he believes "the terrible conditions under which the Thomas family lived... may in some way be related to the death of [Mary]" (328). For Wright, racial segregation and oppression are achieved through the mass media, which disseminates representations of black people as inhuman, criminal, and inferior. In my first chapter, I demonstrated that Jim Crow utilizes Hollywood images of black and white people to deceive Bigger into believing that he can transcend his oppression—a belief that ultimately costs him his life. In this chapter I hypothesize that the criminalization and dehumanization of Bigger through his journalistic representations lead directly to his arrest and execution, respectively. In my next chapter I will shift my focus from *Native Son* to Wright's next publication, *12 Million Black Voices*, a photobook that chronicles the Great Migration. In this way, I will reveal that Wright challenged mainstream representations of African Americans not merely by identifying their violent consequences, but also by advancing alternative images of black life.

CHAPTER THREE: RECLAIMING THE PICTURE: THE USE OF NEW DEAL PHOTOGRAPHS IN *12 MILLION BLACK VOICES*

Richard Wright's photobook *12 Million Black Voices* advances images of African Americans that challenge the mainstream representations of black people he criticizes throughout *Native Son*. Unlike Bigger Thomas, the African Americans depicted in *12 Million Black Voices* are meant to represent the average black person living in the United States in 1941, the year of this photobook's publication. Alongside these images, Wright chronicles the history of black people in the United States in an essay that begins with a description of colonial American slavery and ends with a prediction that African Americans will transcend the confines of Jim Crow. With his prose, Wright contextualizes a series of 88 photographs of working class African Americans. Aside from a few photographs from news sources such as the Associated Press or United Press International, the photographs were originally produced for the Farm Security Administration (FSA), a New Deal program dedicated to assisting people in impoverished rural areas. To choose these pictures, taken by prominent photographers such as Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans, Wright enlisted the help of Edwin Rosskam, a photographer employed by the FSA. In his article "The Depression Era in Black and White," James Goodwin explains the working relationship of Wright and Rosskam, who received credit for photo direction: "Rosskam selected images, prepared a prospective layout, and then met with [Wright] to make changes and adjustments to the placement of prose in relation to picture" (281). In his preface to *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright reveals that his intentional exclusion of African American leaders, intellectuals, or professionals signifies "an effort to simplify a depiction of a complex movement of a debased feudal folk toward a twentieth-century urbanization" (xx). He suggests that such

black people represent an exception to the poverty and oppression experienced by the African American population, not a larger trend of progress. In my previous two chapters, I demonstrated that in *Native Son* Wright identifies the violence and dehumanization that accompany cinematic and journalistic images of African Americans. In this chapter, I will argue that *12 Million Black Voices* constitutes an attempt to displace these images with alternative representations that recontextualize African Americans within their own history.

Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, photographic images were utilized in the quest for social justice for African Americans. For instance, Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith in their introduction to the edited volume *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity*, reveal that the “ill-conceived notion that the American Civil War was ‘a white man’s war’” was debated, “in daguerreotypes, tintypes, and cartes de viste appearing in abolitionist organs and circulated among black soldiers, their kin, and communities” (2). Wallace and Smith argue that such images did not merely reflect a cultural shift, but actually “conditioned a modern way of seeing, physically conveying the new visual code in their material circulation between persons and places as if themselves in search of an ideal philosophy and form” (3). In this way, the authors suggest that photographs held both formal and ideological significance. This coalescence of medium and message found special significance in the self-representations of Sojourner Truth, a black woman born a slave who escaped and rose to prominence as a public speaker, advocating abolition and women’s rights. Augusta Rohrbach explains that Truth was already famous when, in 1864, she turned to *cartes de visite* as a means of self-expression. Literally “visiting cards,” cartes de visite were postcard sized photographs sometimes accompanied by a brief caption. Truth created several: “Dressed in the garb of Quaker womanhood, Sojourner Truth posed numerous times, arranging and

perfecting her image according to many of the visual codes of the period” (88). Since every card features the same text—“I Sell the Shadow to Support the Substance”—the various iterations of the cartes de visite signify an attempt to perfect her image. Although Truth’s use of the word “shadow” may refer to the means by which photographs were made, Elizabeth Abel demonstrates that shadows in photography came to symbolize black resistance. In her book *Signs of the Times: the Visual Politics of Living Jim Crow*, Abel analyzes an FSA photograph of a black man ascending a staircase into the “colored” section of a theater in Mississippi. Commenting on the man’s shadow, which appears about ten feet behind him and partially obscures the movie poster featuring a white actor’s face, Abel comments on the “potential of shadows to make substance illegible” and notes that this man’s shadow warns of “a future gathering of shadows moving steadily and in untold numbers from beyond the photographic frame” (236). Richard A. Courage, in his article “Re-presenting Racial Reality: Chicago’s New (Media) Negro Artists of the Depression Era,” attributes the ability of images to suggest resistance to technological development during the first decades of the twentieth century, which enabled “quicker capture of images, more spontaneous composition, and less reliance on controlled lighting” (311). Moreover, photography possessed the ability to bring images out of the museum or gallery and into “widespread dissemination in magazines and newspapers and public venues” (311). Despite this ability—and the impact of photography on African American Civil Rights—Jim Crow inhibited mass distribution of photographic representations of African American life.

The Farm Security Administration presented the opportunity to correct this transgression through its employment of photographers to capture and archive images of people living in poverty. Although the FSA included agricultural and medical assistance programs, the agency

made its most lasting impact with 65,000 photographs of rural and urban life across the United States. In his book *The Black Image in the New Deal*, Nicholas Natanson argues that the frustration of Marion Post Wolcott—whose images appear throughout *12 Million Black Voices* under the name Marion Post—at the conditions of the Jim Crow south inspired a set of photographs that show “black and white farmers pursuing, with careful separateness, the same Saturday-afternoon-in-town rituals” (3). In these photographs, Wolcott deftly captures the reality that white supremacy manifested not only in tragic events such as lynching, but also in the mundane chores of daily life. More pertinently, she conveys the message that racism is the rule and not the exception. Unfortunately, as Natanson notes, “controversy, racial and nonracial, seemed to follow the Farm Security Administration more doggedly than it did most New Deal agencies,” tracing its opposition to 1935 when it Roosevelt established the agency by executive order—a decision that critics of the New Deal apparently never forgot—under the name the Resettlement Administration (50). Natanson notes in particular that the Farmers Bureau of Adams County, Mississippi, “the self-styled guardian of tradition in this history-soaked corner of southwestern Mississippi” petitioned state legislators to prevent an African American man from working in the FSA office in Natchez, Mississippi on the grounds that white women also worked in this office (49). Because “Mississippi legislators, leery of the New Deal in general and the FSA in particular, were eager to fan the flames of controversy,” the Farmer Bureau’s petition passed with little difficulty (49-50). Although local and state authorities in the southern United States may have been integral in barring African Americans from securing FSA positions at the agency’s regional offices, racial injustice may have existed within the FSA as well. According to Natanson, white applicants “were seven times more likely than blacks to receive standard rehabilitation loans” (53) and even when African Americans applied for loans in greater

numbers, “they were not more likely to [get] them” (54). Such an imbalance also affected the FSA’s photography program as Roy Stryker, the photography director of the FSA, “tended to see black material as notably less usable than white images” (61). While the FSA “produced some sixty thousand print images” (Natanson 3), such efforts apparently fell short in contributing to a complete representation of African American life because, as Benjamin Balthaser notes, before *12 Million Black Voices*, “the great migration and life of urban African Americans were entirely undocumented in large-press book form” (364). While Wright’s opinions of the FSA are unclear, he seems to have been discouraged by its unwillingness to introduce more images of black life into mainstream media. Additionally, J.J. Butts, in his article “New World A-Coming: African American Documentary Intertexts of the Federal Writers’ Project,” comments that in *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright “questions the authority of the FWP over black experience” (653). In his photobook, Wright places the authority over the African American experience into the hands of African Americans. With *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright effectively sidesteps the racist interventions of Roosevelt’s critics and local officials, as well as the shortcomings of the FSA’s administration, to recontextualize these images of black life within the narrative of black history.

By demonstrating white ignorance about African Americans in *Native Son*, Wright’s novel predicts *12 Million Black Voices*. There are two scenes in which white characters refer to the country’s twelve million African American citizens.¹⁵ Just before Bigger, Mary, and Jan arrive to Ernie’s Kitchen Shack, Mary remarks that she has never “been inside of a Negro home. Yet they *must* live like we live. They’re *human*.... There are twelve million of them.... They live in our country.... In the same city with us” (70). During Bigger’s trial, while speaking against segregation, Max makes several references to the “twelve million Negroes” in the United States. His most pertinent comment comes when he asserts: “Multiply Bigger Thomas twelve million

times, allowing for environmental and temperamental variations, and for those Negroes who are completely under the influence of the church, and you have the psychology of the Negro people” (397). As I demonstrate earlier in this thesis, Bigger does not represent the African American population in general but rather a personality type that transcends “environmental and temperamental” considerations, as well as racial or national boundaries. Max’s comments might be a hyperbolic attempt to convince the judge presiding over Bigger’s case not to condemn Bigger to death. However, it seems more likely that Max’s comments signify the white belief that nearly every African American lives on the brink of a violent outburst. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois relates a typical interaction with white people: “They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? They say, I know an excellent colored man in my town;... or, Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil?” (3-4). In this way, Du Bois suggests that even the most well-meaning white people often fail to understand black people because, to put it simply, they do not have to. Conversely, African Americans understand white people because they must to survive. Du Bois introduces this double-consciousness that enables African Americans to live “within and without the Veil” (1) in “The Forethought” to *The Souls of Black Folk*, writing that in leaving “the world of the white man, I have stepped within the Veil, raising it that you may view faintly its deeper recesses” (1-2). Interestingly, Bigger steps outside the Veil into the world of white people when he goes to work for the Daltons. Bigger views the white community’s expectations of black violence as commonplace. When Bigger is on his way to his interview with Mr. Dalton, the narrator relates, “Suppose a police saw him wandering in a white neighborhood like this? It would be thought that he was trying to rob or rape somebody. He grew angry” (44) and later Bigger contemplates that a white person, “might

think he would steal a dime, rape a woman, get drunk, or cut somebody” (113). Bigger’s fear of arousing suspicion demonstrates that the presence of more accepting or open-minded white people does not necessarily decrease the anxiety of African Americans.

Although only ten of the 88 photographs in *12 Million Black Voices* feature white people, the whites depicted are engaging in oppressive actions such as lynching black men, forcing African Americans into sharecropping, and objectifying black women. In the second chapter, “Inheritors of Slavery,” a caption that reads, “The law is white,” appears beneath two photographs (44-45). The image on the left depicts a black couple across a table from three white men and beneath paintings of three other white men; the image on the right depicts twelve white men surrounding a dead African American man hanging from a tree. Through this jarring juxtaposition, Wright accuses the legal system of serving only white people while comparing the United States’s judicial process to a lynch mob. Toward the beginning of this chapter, Wright includes a Dorothea Lange photograph of an obese Mississippi plantation owner with one foot on the bumper of his car, standing in front of five thin African American men, presumably farm workers (30). This composition, which foregrounds whiteness and marginalizes blackness, clarifies the racial dynamic hinted at earlier in the photobook in a photograph by Russell Lee that is captioned, “The black dancer” (21). This photograph includes the book’s first images of European Americans although its caption does not acknowledge their presence. Moreover, the white people who comprise the audience either face away from the camera or are partially obscured. Although this photograph is not as critical of white people as other photographs in *12 Million Black Voices*, the objectification of black dancers by white spectators reveals how black women are dehumanized and in so doing establishes that a standard of dehumanization rules interracial relations. However, that every photographer represented in *12 Million Black Voices* is

white problematizes Wright's use of FSA photographs to denounce Jim Crow racism. That Wright neither sought out existing works nor commissioned original works by black photographers suggests that he intentionally chose to use photographs taken by white photographers. One might argue that this decision by Wright challenges my argument that through *12 Million Black Voices* Wright creates more realistic and positive representations of black life. However, Wright's use of photographs taken by white people demonstrates that images are often understood through their context and the FSA photographs tend to contextualize the black experience within the white experience. While FSA photographers intended to expose the harsh reality of Jim Crow segregation, Wright reveals their inability to understand the broader scope of black history. In this way, Wright's use of New Deal photographs carries his indictment of white media from *Native Son* into *12 Million Black Voices*, albeit to a lesser degree, while reappropriating images of black life to reify the black experience.

Wright repurposes these New Deal photographs to craft positive and realistic visual representations of African Americans as community-oriented, mutually supportive, hardworking, faithful, resilient, and integral to society. This project of writing against mainstream representations of black life apparently required Wright to abandon the cynicism of *Native Son*, which he claimed in "How 'Bigger' Was Born" was written with the intention of creating a work "so hard and deep that they [his audience] would have to face it without the consolation of tears" (454). Robert Butler notes that *12 Million Black Voices* does not employ the "emotional distance" typical of Wright's work, but rather "achieves an unusual warmth" and goes on to point out that Wright is uncharacteristically sympathetic toward African American folk and religious life (358). The prose of *12 Million Black Voices* purports to speak for African Americans in general as Wright narrates the story of black people in the United States in the first

person plural. Even specific moments from *12 Million Black Voices* seem to contradict scenes from *Native Son*. For instance, in *12 Million Black Voices* the narrator boasts: “We were able to seize nine black boys in a jail in Scottsboro, Alabama, lift them so high... that they became symbols to all the world of the plight of black folk in America” (145). However, in *Native Son*, when Jan asks Bigger, “Don’t you think we did a good job in helping to keep’ em from killing [the Scottsboro boys],” Bigger responds disinterestedly, “It was all right” (75). Similarly, while the narrator of *Native Son* depicts Mrs. Thomas and Reverend Hammond as naïve, even delusional, in their faith, in *12 Million Black Voices* Wright praises church life, likening it to “placing one’s ear to another’s chest to hear the unquenchable murmur of the human heart” (131).¹⁶ Such comparisons do not signify a contradiction—Wright reveals in “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” that in *Native Son* he “gave no more reality to the other characters than that which Bigger himself saw” (460). For *12 Million Black Voices* Wright transitions from a microscopic view of one man’s experience to what Brian Richardson terms, “a radical kind of narrative voice that embodies a vast subjectivity” (204). This shift in narrative voice facilitates a shift in focus. While in *Native Son* Wright chronicles the devastation of mass media images of black people on Bigger, in *12 Million Black Voices* he attempts to supplant these caricatures of black life with actual images of black life. By speaking on behalf of all black people in *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright establishes the credibility of his representations of African Americans.

Wright reiterates the need for alternative images of black life through the juxtaposition of images and words in the opening pages of *12 Million Black Voices*. Three images appear by the conclusion of the second sentence of *12 Million Black Voices*. The first picture depicts the hands of a sharecropper around the handle of a tool with the title of the first chapter—“Our Strange Birth”—across his chest. The next picture depicts an elderly man squinting into the sun and the

photobook's first sentence appears below him: "Each day when you see us black folk upon the dusty land of the farms or upon the hard pavement of the city streets, you usually take us for granted and think you know us, but our history is far stranger than you suspect, and we are not what we seem" (10). This opening sentence, which receives its own page along with the aforementioned photograph, again hints at double-consciousness in its confrontation of white ignorance about the black community. In the first chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," Du Bois explains the affect of double-consciousness on African Americans: "One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (5). On the following page of *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright alludes to this division when he claims that the "outward guise" of African Americans hides "an uneasily tied knot of pain and hope" coupled with an image of an African American trash collector taking a break from hauling his cart (11). These few pages wherein photographs outnumber sentences precede six and a half pages of text with no photographs—the most uninterrupted text in the entire photobook. These pages begin with the slave trade, recalling that men of all European countries "denied our human personalities... dragged us across thousands of miles of ocean, and hurled us into another land, strange and hostile" (12). Wright continues this history of black people in the United States, proceeding through the centuries of slavery, genocide, religious hypocrisy, and paternalism, finally concluding that these conditions "congealed into a national tradition that dominates, in small or large measure, all black and white relations throughout the nation until this day" (18). Immediately after this proclamation are six images with the following captions: "The black maid," "The black industrial worker," "The black stevedore," "The black dancer," "The black waiter," and "The black sharecropper" (18-23). By contrasting a history of

white oppression of African Americans with images of black people working, Wright demonstrates the injustice symbolized by the absence of such images from mainstream culture.

At the beginning of *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright reveals his intended audience to be white Americans through the phrase “when you see us black folk,” which appears in the photobook’s first sentence. Indeed, while he quickly abandons the second person pronoun in favor of impersonal labels such as “Bosses of the Buildings,” “Lords of the Land,” or “poor whites,” his use of “you” in the text’s first line establishes the dynamic of interracial dialogue that guides the entire narrative. *12 Million Black Voices*—which offers information that would have been common knowledge to any African American alive in 1941—may not have been intended for a black audience at all. A review of the photobook by Leroy Allen that appeared in the journal *Social Science* cites its retail cost as \$3.00 (432). While the Department of Labor’s website claims the “nominal minimum wage” in 1941 was \$0.30 an hour (“Minimum Wage”), an article by Thomas N. Maloney published in *The Journal of Economic History* reveals that in 1940 salaries for African American men were, on average, less than half of salaries for European American men (360 note 3). Moreover, Maloney notes that in “1940, about 38 percent of the black male work force worked on farms” and that farmworkers were “likely to have received unreported in-kind transfers in addition to reported wages” (376). Wright describes this reality of sharecropper life in layman’s terms: “If we have been lucky the year before, maybe we have saved a few dollars to tide us through the fall months, but spring finds us begging an ‘advance’—credit—from the Lords of the Land” (38). Since *12 Million Black Voices* cost what would be equivalent to roughly \$50.00 in 2016, Wright probably realized that sharecropping families would not be able to purchase his photobook. By speaking for African Americans to a European American audience—and an audience in desperate need of education on this subject—Wright

rebels against the racial dynamics he understands so well in order to advance his alternative history of black Americans.

By confronting his white audience, Wright rejects the expectations of black subservience in the United States. As Wright explains, the racial hierarchy imposed by Jim Crow demands that black southerners respond to white southerners “not in terms of objective truth, but in terms of what the white man wished to hear” (41). To describe this particular facet of oppression, Wright offers the hypothetical experience of a white man asking a black man a question:

If a white man stopped a black man on a southern road and asked: “Say, there, boy! It’s one o’clock isn’t it?” the black man would answer: “Yessuh.”

If the white man asked: “Say, it’s not one o’clock, is it, boy?” the black man would answer: “Nawsuh.” (41)

Wright explains that during such an exchange, African Americans “would listen closely, not only to the obvious words, but also to the intonations of voice that indicated what kind of answer he wanted; and, automatically, we would determine whether an affirmative or negative reply was expected.” The anxiety that African Americans experience at “an innocent question” proves useful in understanding the seriousness of his project in *12 Million Black Voices*. While this theoretical—but surely not imaginary—conversation takes place “on a southern road,” Wright’s depiction of race relations in the northern United States equal this scene’s grimness. For example, Wright explains that “white workers charge that we black folk corrupt the life of the city, menace their wages, lengthen their hours of work, decrease the value of their very homes in the neighborhoods where we both live” (122). However, Wright looks past this resentment to blame the wealthy elite for turning poor blacks and poor whites against each other. He explains that “the Bosses of the Buildings” conspire to prevent black and white people from

understanding “how artificial and man-made is this enmity between us.” Ultimately, the meddling of “the Bosses of the Buildings” succeeds in making the northern and southern states indistinguishable to African Americans: “Again we say, of the North as of the South, that life for us is daily warfare” (123). By juxtaposing the experiences of southern and northern African Americans, Wright demonstrates that African American history constitutes a single narrative, despite regional variations.

For Wright, the history of the United States cannot be understood outside of the black experience and *12 Million Black Voices* finds Wright recontextualizing white people within black history. After Wright’s introductory statement that white people do not understand black people, he backtracks several centuries: “We millions of black folk who live in this land were born into Western civilization of a weird and paradoxical birth” (12). By returning to the beginning of African American history, Wright can tell the story of the black community’s experience in the United States truthfully and completely. Only after establishing the centrality of black people to American history does he introduce white people. In the next sentence he explains that men from England, Holland, Denmark, France, Spain, and Portugal “denied our human personalities, tore us from our native soil, weighted our legs with chains, stacked us like cord-wood in the foul holes of clipper ships, dragged us across thousands of miles of ocean, and hurled us into another land” (12). In this description of the black community’s first entry to the United States, Wright carefully positions black people before white people to reinforce the centrality of black people to *12 Million Black Voices*. This concise history of the slave trade also reminds his white audience that African Americans do not live in the United States by choice. Wright spends much of the remainder of his photobook explaining that the “Lords of the Land”—the white southerners who owned plantations—and the “Bosses of the Buildings”—the

white northerners who owned tenements and factories—ensured that “we had no word to say about anything that happened in our lives” (145). Because African American history is a history of enslavement, marginalization, and oppression, Wright’s effort to divert focus from the white experience demands a revolutionary shift in perception.

Throughout *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright privileges the black experience through images of black people at work, at play, at rest, in church, and with their families and accompanying text that details black community. An emotionally resonant photograph by Jack Delano appears at the beginning of the second chapter and depicts a married African American couple sitting on their bed beneath photographs of them in their youth (29). The title of the chapter—“Inheritors of Slavery”—divides the elderly couple and their portraits, which suggests that the legacy of slavery continues to affect the black community. However, Wright simultaneously contradicts the power of white supremacy by demonstrating the longevity of black marriage because it appears that a matter of decades have passed between Delano’s photograph and their youthful portraits. Through this juxtaposition of word and image, Wright suggests that black families are capable of withstanding any of the atrocities of slavery or Jim Crow segregation. In the next chapter, “Death on the City Pavements,” Wright extends this sentiment to apply it to African Americans living in northern states when he positions two pictures of young blacks dancing (126-127). In both photographs, everyone depicted is either smiling or laughing. Although no caption accompanies these photographs, they appear just after two images of African Americans being harassed by white people along with captions that read, “We are always in battle” and “The tidings of victory are few” (124-125). By juxtaposing these images of white oppression and black joy, Wright reiterates the ultimate failure of Jim Crow oppression to destroy the black community. While explaining the significance of church in the

African American community, Wright explains that the “preacher tells of days long ago and of a people whose sufferings were like ours” (68). More importantly still, Wright relates that upon receiving spiritual encouragement, the congregation’s “eyes become absorbed in a vision” (68). This vision, which he describes in a lengthy, italicized, completely unpunctuated sentence that fills the next four pages, is none other than the entirety of the biblical narrative: the communion of God and the angels in Heaven, Satan’s failed revolt and descent into Hell, the creation and fall of humanity, the First Coming of Christ, and, finally, the Second Coming of Christ (69-72). The most significant moment in this miniature sermon is the historical moment in which his audience is situated: “*Lucifer still works rebellion seducing persuading falsifying and God through His prophets says that He will come for a second time bringing not peace but a sword to rout the powers of darkness and build a new Jerusalem*” (72). Although Wright’s relationship with the church was fraught with difficulty—indeed, in *Black Boy* Wright offers great detail of the pain caused to him by his legalistic Seventh-Day Adventist upbringing—he nonetheless accepts the power and comfort offered by suggesting that slavery and Jim Crow were Satanic instruments and that Jesus would return to strike down the white oppressors. By describing this experience as a “vision” that absorbs the congregations’ eyes—as opposed to their hearts, minds, or souls, for example—Wright subtly suggests that spiritual encouragement harnesses a power similar to photographic reality. Interestingly, in the article “Richard Wright Preaches the Nation,” John M. Reilly argues that in *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright emulates the oratorical style of preachers and that his prose “is a secularization of the sacred moral voice of the folk” (117). Reilly goes on to assert that Wright endeavors to convince his audience that “Blacks can become their own historical subject, rather than the object of others’ history, and by that accomplishment assume a unique historical character” (118). By contextualizing positive images of black life within a

secularized sermon of black history, Wright proclaims the social, spiritual, and moral value of African Americans.

By reclaiming government images of black life, Wright revises American history by foregrounding African Americans. Moreover, he speaks for the black community—past and present—when he informs and reminds his audience that African Americans have been historically misrepresented and misunderstood. By positioning mainstream representations of black people in *Native Son* and positive representations of black people in *12 Million Black Voices* as binary opposites, Wright implies that honoring the humanity of African Americans requires a paradigmatic shift in the way black people are looked at. In her collection of essays *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, bell hooks argues that black empowerment's most effective force is "self-love" as it constitutes "a revolutionary intervention that undermines practices of domination" (20). It may seem strange to consider Wright—with his notoriously tough and bitter worldview—as practicing self-love but hooks's conception of love is not so much emotional as it is psychological. For hooks, to practice self-love is to reject mainstream "messages that we [black people] have no value, are worthless" (19). Since Wright asserts the value and worth of black life through *12 Million Black Voices*, particularly through the recontextualization of photographic images, hooks offers insight into the import of Wright's process when she explains, "Loving blackness as political resistance transforms our ways of looking and being, and thus creates the conditions necessary for us to move against the forces of domination and death and reclaim black life" (20). Hooks's assertion that black self-love can actually compromise the authority of Jim Crow suggests that Wright's alternative narrative and representation of African American history can achieve the paradigmatic shift for which he asks. *12 Million Black Voices* constitutes an attempt to right historic wrongs.

Wright's presupposition that media representations have real political and social effects undergirds the ideological import of *12 Million Black Voices*. In *Black Marxism*, Cedric J. Robinson reveals that the Great Depression led to Wright's political maturation. Robinson asserts that Wright originally "hoped that this historical transformation would be surgical" but that by the early 1940s "this ordered revolution had been replaced by a chaos consisting of the collective action of a brutalized human force" (298). Since Robinson claims that Wright viewed racism as a byproduct of capitalism, the Great Depression presented a viable motif for the cause of black Civil Rights. For Wright, this "brutalized human force" is comprised of marginalized people from any race. In the last chapter of *12 Million Black Voices*, "Men in the Making," Wright relates the experience of sharing meals with poor whites during the Depression: "We invited them into our homes and broke our scanty bread with them, and this was our supreme gesture of trust" (144). He goes on to explain that through such camaraderie

we encountered for the first time in our lives the full effect of those forces that tended to reshape our folk consciousness, and a few of us stepped forth and accepted within the confines of our personalities the death of our old folk lives, an acceptance of a death that enabled us to cross class and racial lines, a death that made us free (144).

Contemporary readers might feel discomfort at Wright's comparison of social progress to shedding one's black roots, but Wright complicates matters further when he counters this image of black and white unity with a story of looters: "inarticulate black men and women, filled with a naïve, peasant anger" who caused "more than \$2,000,000" of damage to Harlem businesses (145). Wright's sudden and improbable shift toward nonviolence and interracial unity, which occurs in the climax of *12 Million Black Voices*, contradicts Bigger's climactic epiphany in

Native Son: “What I killed for, I *am*!” (429). While Wright emphasizes the importance of understanding Bigger throughout *Native Son* and “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” the conclusion to *12 Million Black Voices* reminds his audience that Bigger does not represent the African American community. In fact, Wright exhibits surprising optimism about race relations at the end of *12 Million Black Voices* when he proclaims: “The common road of hope which we all have traveled has brought us into a stronger kinship than any words, laws, or legal claims” (146). Despite his confidence, Wright’s closing prophecy reveals his belief that there remains work to be done: “We are with the new tide. We stand at the crossroads.... Men are moving! And we shall be with them....” (147). Beneath this proclamation there is a photograph of a black man in his backyard in Washington D.C. staring into the sky. By concluding *12 Million Black Voices* with a photograph, rather than text, Wright reminds his audience that the progression of African Americans he describes hinges on the production and acceptance of images of African Americans that represent black people positively and repair the damage done by racist representations of black life.

CONCLUSION: RICHARD WRIGHT'S LEGACY

Richard Wright's attempts to challenge mainstream representations of African Americans in *Native Son* and *12 Million Black Voices* found immediate acclaim. A review in *The Christian Century*—a Chicago-based magazine that published prominent writers such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Reinhold Niebuhr—praised *Native Son*'s efficacy, claiming the novel was “completely convincing in the stark reality of its people and profoundly disturbing to those unaccustomed to look beneath the respectable surface of city life” (82). Clifton Fadiman, writing in the *New Yorker*, made a similar argument when he claimed that almost nobody “can read [*Native Son*] without an enlarged and painful sense of what it means to be a Negro in the United States of America seventy-seven years after the Emancipation Proclamation” (48). By commending the realism of Wright's representations of African American life, these reviewers imply that such representations contrast with the images of black life typically offered to a white audience. A *New York Times* review of *12 Million Black Voices* by Ralph Thompson reveals that the photobook had a similar impact: “A more eloquent and belligerent statement of its kind could hardly have been devised... it is a stinging indictment of American attitudes toward the Negro over a period of 300 years” (106). L.D. Reddick reiterates this acknowledgement of the historical singularity of Wright's photobook in an article published by *The Jewish Survey* when he observes that *12 Million Black Voices* “is the most poetic prose statement of the folk history of the Negro in this land yet published.... The whole suggests America's Epic” (114). Although Wright's work also received negative reviews, the fact that mainstream presses—both religious and secular—praised Wright for advancing new and realistic representations of black life demonstrates the necessity and success of Wright's project.

The impact of *Native Son* and *12 Million Black Voices* did not end with its effect on contemporary reviewers, but signified a milestone in the years leading up to the African American Civil Rights Movement. In her article “A Negative Utopia,” Zoe Trodd writes that in 1940, the year of *Native Son*’s publication, “Richard Wright defined a central struggle of the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement” (25). Specifically, Trodd credits Wright with demonstrating segregation’s duality as “both physical and psychological” which he expresses through “a cultural borderland of manholes, coal-bunkers, and sewers.” Trodd suggests that Wright’s protests transcended literature and helped lay the foundation of the Civil Rights Movement alongside fights for “the physical space of buses, public schools, and lunch counters” and “symbolic space” such as “the ballot box.” Megan Obourn, in “Early Civil Rights ‘Voice Work’”—an article that draws a parallel between the impact of Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston on the Civil Rights Movement—argues for a more direct connection between *Native Son* and the fight for Civil Rights. Obourn argues that Wright’s first novel calls readers “to engage (violently if necessary) in a struggle to disrupt the power structures in place so that such a[n African American literary] political voice might be able to emerge” (260). Although Wright eventually left the United States and moved to France, his legacy continued in Chicago. In 1941, the same year that *12 Million Black Voices* was published, James Farmer moved to Chicago to organize protests against racial segregation. He formed the Committee of Racial Equality (CORE), a multiracial group that was largely comprised of graduate students from the University of Chicago (“James Farmer: A Chicago Lunch Counter Sit-In”). Indeed, the group successfully integrated Jack Spratt Coffeehouse, which stood less than a mile from the Dalton home in *Native Son*.¹⁷ Although the most famous moments of the Civil Rights Movement occurred in the southern United States and in Washington D.C., Adam Green details Chicago’s importance to

the movement in his book *Selling the Race*, in 1966, “[Martin Luther] King joined local and national organizers in a . . . campaign to ‘end slums’ through mass challenge to segregated real estate markets structuring the vast majority of the city” (216). This resistance to racist housing practices again calls to mind *Native Son*, as Mr. Dalton owns the South Side Real Estate Company that rents the Thomas family their kitchenette. Wright’s resistance to white supremacy and his understanding of the specific needs of the African American community mark him as a kind of prophetic voice. However, far from crying in the wilderness, Wright spoke directly to a generation of activists who heard his call for equality, empowerment, and freedom.

Of course, the African American Civil Rights Movement was hardly confined to Chicago, or even the United States. Over the course of this thesis I have mentioned a few early landmarks in the fight for equal rights, such as abolitionism, technological advancements in photography that enabled African Americans—most notably Sojourner Truth—to create self-representations, and the Great Migration. By the middle of the twentieth century the fight for Civil Rights gained international momentum. Around the time that Richard Wright published *Native Son* and *12 Million Black Voices*, the United States began its involvement in World War II, which accustomed African Americans to a greater level of racial parity. Veterans returned from military training and combat with new tools to advance the struggle for racial equality at home, such as the ability to lead large groups and withstand pressure both physical and psychological. The Cold War also advanced the cause of African American Civil Rights because of the Soviet Union’s harsh criticism of the United States’ failure to meet high standards of civil and human rights. Independence wars in African countries such as Kenya and Algeria demonstrated that black people could effect change against oppressive government regimes. Moreover, the independence wars contributed to the rise of Black Nationalism in the United

States advocated most prominently by Malcolm X. These events of global politics inspired sit-ins and protest marches throughout the United States, which in turn gave way to decisive victories such as *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. After the assassinations of Malcolm X in 1965 and Martin Luther King in 1968, the Civil Rights Movement became less codified, but its legacy and struggles continue into the present.

A more recent expression of the Civil Rights Movement is the historic 2008 election of Barack Obama as President of the United States, which again brought together the legacy of Civil Rights and South Side Chicago.¹⁸ Although Obama grew up in Hawaii, in 1985 he accepted a job as a community organizer, “helping poor blacks on Chicago’s South Side” (Lizza 22). More specifically, Obama was hired by “a group that aimed to convert the black churches of Chicago’s South Side into agents of social change” (24). Perhaps Obama worked with one of the South Side churches Wright praises in *12 Million Black Voices*: “Our churches provide social activities for us, cook and serve meals, organize baseball and basketball teams, operate stores and businesses, and conduct social agencies” (131). Obama met his wife, Michelle (née Robinson), who was born and raised on the South Side, while they worked at the same law firm. The couple married and had two daughters, but even after he was elected to the U.S. Senate in 2004, the Obama family remained on the South Side, albeit in a far more diverse and affluent area than where the Thomas family lives in *Native Son*. Even so, the Obamas moved from the South Side of Chicago into the White House.

The idea of an African American president is completely fantastical to Bigger Thomas, who pretends to be the president when he and Gus “play ‘white’” (17) towards the beginning of *Native Son*. Bigger and Gus play this game for a few minutes and act out different scenarios—such as military leaders planning a siege and J. P. Morgan selling “twenty thousand shares of

U.S. Steel” (18)—before Bigger and Gus converse as the President and the Secretary of State, respectively.¹⁹ During this last scenario, the pair discusses how to quell civil unrest among African Americans:

“Well, you see, the niggers is raising sand all over the country,” Bigger said, struggling to keep back his laughter. “We’ve got to do something with these black folks....”

“Oh, if it’s about the niggers, I’ll be right there, Mr. President,” Gus said.

They hung up their imaginary receivers and leaned against the wall and laughed.

(19)

Bigger and Gus’s expectation that the U.S. government’s primary interest rests in oppressing black people is realized over the course of the novel. Although Richard Wright understood and confronted the myriad means by which African Americans were dehumanized and marginalized, in *Native Son* his most potent treatment of this project rests in the role of film and newspapers in advancing Jim Crow racism. In the first chapter of this thesis I demonstrate that Hollywood functions as a tool of white supremacy to trick Bigger into entering white society, only to punish him for doing so. In the following chapter I demonstrate that newspapers possess a near-legal authority in that they convict Bigger of rape and murder and sentence him to death. Ultimately, Wright suggests that to the extent that it goes unchallenged, the authority wielded by the mass media over African Americans secures the subjugation of the black community.

However, Richard Wright does not let this power go unchallenged. In the final chapter of my thesis I demonstrate that Wright’s next project, *12 Million Black Voices*, counters Bigger’s despair and hopelessness with empowerment and optimism. In his photobook, released on the heels of *Native Son*, Wright repurposes the same power the media uses against black people in

order to positively represent African Americans. The creation of positive representations of black life does not constitute an end in itself, but rather a springboard to a better political, economic, and social future. In the last chapter of *12 Million Black Voices*, “Men in the Making,” Wright establishes the importance of the black community to the United States:

If we had been allowed to participate in the vital processes of America’s national growth, what would have been the texture of our lives, the pattern of our traditions, the routine of our customs, the state of our arts, the code of our laws, the function of our government! Whatever others may say, we black folk say that America would have been stronger and greater! (145)

Such claims directly contradict the marginalization of African Americans by demanding the centrality of black people to American life. The import of this proclamation is double—Wright explicitly encourages the black community to continue their forward march toward Civil Rights while implicitly reminding the white community that they can rectify their mistakes by supporting African Americans henceforth. This positive outlook does not contradict *Native Son*’s decidedly grim worldview. Rather, the depiction of Jim Crow racism in *Native Son* provides a realistic image of contemporary black life so that Wright’s readership will understand the necessity of his call in *12 Million Black Voices* to continue fighting for Civil Rights. Indeed, in the final pages of his photobook he seems to envision the Civil Rights victories of the upcoming decades. Wright invokes the language of Du Bois’s famous statement in *The Souls of Black Folk* that “the problem of the Twentieth-Century is the problem of the color-line” (1) only to demand that this problem is being solved by the very means of mass communication used to marginalize and oppress black people (e.g. wires and print). In this way, at the end of *12 Million Black Voices* Wright positions himself on the precipice of the major Civil Rights victories that continue into

the twenty-first century:

The Bosses of the Buildings say: “Your problem is beyond solution!”

We answer: “Our problem is being solved. We are crossing the line you dared us to cross, though we pay in the coin of death!”

The seasons of the plantation no longer dictate the lives of many of us; hundreds of thousands of us are moving into the sphere of conscious history.

We are with the new tide. We stand at the crossroads. We watch each new procession. The hot wires carry urgent appeals. Print compels us. Voices are speaking. Men are moving! And we shall be with them.... (147)

NOTES

1. For a fuller analysis of Bigger Thomas's relationship to the black community, see James Baldwin's classic study *Notes of a Native Son*, specifically the chapters "Everybody's Protest Novel" and "Many Thousands Gone." More recent treatments of this issue include Aimé J. Ellis's "Where Is Bigger's Humanity? Black Male Community in Richard Wright's *Native Son*," W. Lawrence Hogue's "Can the Subaltern Speak? A Postcolonial, Existential Reading of Richard Wright's *Native Son*," or Matthew Elder's "Social Demarcation and the Forms of Psychological Fracture in Book One of Richard Wright's *Native Son*."

2. As Jonathan Elmer notes in his article, "Spectacle and Event in *Native Son*," there is no direct relationship between Jack and Bigger's masturbation and the newsreel or film. Elmer explains that the "elements of a enduring and toxic cultural fantasy—the rich white girl, at once pure and naughty, the desiring and violent black man, even the punishment of lynching (in Bigger's disquieting joke about the bananas)—but the fantasy is not realized in any plausible way" (780). By inciting the reader to a narratively illogical connection, Wright reinforces the thematic importance of the black rapist myth.

3. *Trader Horn* never represents Africans as human, so while Horn departs with several black men in the film's closing shot, this conclusion nonetheless implies that he is alone, thereby further dehumanizing the film's black characters.

4. The language spoken is Swahili. John M. Mugane points out in his book *The Story of Swahili* that "as far back as *Trader Horn*... Swahili words and speech have been heard in hundreds of movies" (7).

5. Anthony Reed analyzes *Native Son* through a postcolonial lens in his article "'Another Map of the South Side': *Native Son* as Postcolonial Novel."

6. Benjamin's "second technology" refers to industrial and mechanical advancement, which reduces humanity's presence and distances humans from "nature" (107).

7. Becca Gercken argues that because the "black male body cannot be successfully renarrated through existing Hollywood tropes" that through *Native Son* and *The Outsider* Wright attempted "to create a new method of narration—the cinematic novel—to tell the story of two men emasculated by the dominant culture, two men who ultimately constitute little more than the object of the gaze, the absence of desire" (646). In this way, she suggests that Wright sought to protest Hollywood's racist representations of African Americans through both the form and substance of the novel.

8. Yoshinobu Hakutani, in his book *Richard Wright and Racial Discourse*, states that "Wright was the first major writer to deal with sexual relationships between black and white people" and that the physical interaction between Mary and Bigger "reinforces the image central to the tragedy, an image of the forbidden sexual relationship between a black man and a white woman" (61).

9. In *Redefining Rape*, Estelle Freedman notes that while a handful of European American men were imprisoned for raping black women or girls in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, "most white men escaped punishment" and "the rule remained impunity for white men who assaulted African American girls or women" (79). Joel Williamson, in his book *A Rage for Order*, notes that when economic depression struck the American South in the 1890s—simultaneously with the formation of the interracial Populist party—white men, who "saw themselves as the providers and protectors in their families... found themselves less and less able to provide for their women" (82). Williamson argues that the myth of "the black beast rapist" developed in response to the perceived threat of white masculinity: "If white men

could not provide for their women materially as they had done before, they could certainly protect them from a much more awful threat—the outrage of their purity, and hence their piety, by black men” (82). Later in the book, Williamson notes that in 1905 in Atlanta, which had experienced “rough and rapid growth... in the previous decade,” three rapes committed by white men against black women “received little notice in the press, even though one was a most awful and murderous affair” while similar charges against black men were believed unquestioningly regardless of implausibility (147). Apparently there were precautions taken to protect the black community against increasing white fears of black sexual violence, but “the best precautions failed, and the white man’s awful revenge spread a terror through the black community” (147). It seems, then, that the myth of the black rapist developed to combat the increasing economic, social, or political presence of African Americans.

10. Sondra Guttman, in her article “What Bigger Killed For: Rereading Violence Against Women in *Native Son*,” expertly navigates the intricacies of the novel’s representation of rape.

11. For a fascinating look at *Native Son*’s psychoanalytic implications, see Abdul R. JanMohamed’s book *The Death-Bound-Subject: Richard Wright’s Archaeology of Death*, specifically the chapter “*Native Son*: Symbolic-Death,” wherein JanMohamed argues that the novel “is structured like a dream and has to be read as such” (77).

12. Interestingly, Barbara Johnson, in her insightful essay, “The Re(a)d and the Black,” reveals that Bigger’s blackness undermines the authenticity of his ransom note: “Bigger is compelled to sign his writing ‘Red.’ Yet the note is signed ‘Black as well: *‘Do what this letter say’*” (151; emphasis in original). However, Bigger goes unsuspected, despite authoring the letter and being present at its reception, because “In passing under the signature ‘Red,’ the text’s blackness is precisely what goes un-read” (151).

13. The section from *Black Boy* that details his disillusionment with Communism was republished in 1949 in the ex-Communist anthology *The God That Failed*. Moreover, William Maxwell notes that the 1953 publication of *The Outsider* “export[ed]... anti-Communist themes to the European shores of the Black Atlantic” (3). Houston Baker notes, in his introduction to *Twentieth-Century Interpretations of Native Son*, that the Communist Party “criticized *Native Son* for... its individualism and failure to portray the black and white masses of America” (6).

14. This character is not the same Jack that Bigger plots to rob Blum’s with. Aside from the fact that their manners of speech are completely different, this Jack claims to have a “wife ’n’ baby” (Wright 251) while there is no indication that Bigger’s friend is married or has children. These characters probably represent average African American citizens of Chicago and voice generic opinions for and against the various “Biggers” because, as Wright claims, “there was not just one Bigger, but many of them” (Wright 434).

15. The 1940 census determined that there were 12,865,518 black people living in the United States (Gibson and Jung 115).

16. For a treatment of Wright’s views of religion in his later works, see Michael Lackey’s *African American Atheists and Political Liberation*, specifically the chapter “The Humanist/Atheist Controversy in Richard Wright’s *The Outsider*.”

17. Jack Spratt Coffeehouse was on 47th Street and Kimbark Avenue (“James Farmer: A Lunch Counter Sit-In”). The Daltons live at 4605 Drexel Boulevard (Wright 44).

18. It is important to note that Obama’s mother was a European American woman from Kansas and his father was a black man from Kenya. While Obama is as white as he is black, he is nonetheless the first U.S. President with any African heritage and is generally considered the first black president.

19. The first African American Secretary of State was Colin Powell, appointed by George W. Bush in 2001.

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